

## “TO BE EXTERMINATED AS PARTISANS”

On a Note by Himmler

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# “To Be Exterminated as Partisans”: On a Note by Himmler

**Florent BRAYARD**

**Abstract** – Most historians now agree that Hitler’s decision to completely wipe out the Jews was made at the end of 1941, probably in December. Yet many questions remain unanswered. We know that Himmler recorded the following words from his meeting with Hitler on December 18: “Jewish question: to be exterminated as partisans.” However, we do not know exactly what that statement meant. Was it an order, a clarification, a justification, or a simple rhetorical statement? What did the two men talk about? Clearly, that single phrase does not sum up the entire meeting. In this paper, Florent Brayard attempts to answer these questions by reviewing the evolution of the “Final Solution,” a highly complex program that resulted in the extermination of millions of human beings.

## 1.

It is as though I had lost my way and asked someone the way home. He says he will show me and walks along a nice smooth path. This suddenly comes to an end. And now my friend says: "All you have to do now is find the rest of the way home from here."<sup>1</sup>

In many respects, Ludwig Wittgenstein's enigmatic parable applies to historians. Their friend in this case could be archives, and home represents the truth. Archives indeed lead us partway down the path toward understanding the past, but they do not always lead to definite conclusions. A time comes when their usefulness expires. At that point, the historian has to continue down the path alone; a path that is difficult and full of inconveniences, and one that requires him/her to negotiate a tangle of hypotheses and conjectures.

The history of the extermination of the Jews is a telling example of how difficult leaving the path of archival material – which is scant in this case – can be, as well as the pressing need to do so. Few archives survived the war. The absence of documentation is due to fortuitous circumstances – some was lost by accident, some disappeared under bombings – as well as to a concerted plan to eliminate any trace of a policy Himmler once vowed would never be documented for posterity. To be sure, he ordered Eichmann to destroy all his office files. All that remained of what would have been a critical source were some letters sent by Department IVb4 of the Head Office for Reich Security (RSHA) to other offices such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose archives did survive for the most part, and where the only surviving copy (of 30) of the minutes from the Wannsee Conference in January 1942 was found. By chance, a sizable portion, and later almost the entirety of Goebbels's diary was also recovered. The propaganda minister wrote it over some twenty years, recording detailed information, particularly on personal meetings with Hitler.<sup>2</sup> Also uncovered were minutes of Table Talks (*Tischgespräche*), an account of speeches the dictator delivered to his guests.<sup>3</sup> Occasionally, other documents of significant historical importance surface, such as Hitler's "authorization" to exterminate the mentally ill, which, interestingly, was backdated to September 1, 1939, the day the war began.<sup>4</sup> However, no proof of an explicit order by Hitler to exterminate the Jews has ever been found.

1. I thank Olivier Giraud for his comments on this paper. The citation is by Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, edited G. H. von Wright, translated by Peter Winch (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), 53.

2. For more on the discovery of this critical source, see Astrid Eckert and Stefan Martens, "Glasplatten im märkischen Sand: Beitrag zur Überlieferung der sogenannten Goebbels-Tagebücher," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* (2004): 478-526.

3. Adolph Hitler, *Monologe im Führerhauptquartier 1941-1944* (Hamburg: Orbis Verlag, 1980); Henry Picker, *Hitlers Tischgespräche im Führerhauptquartier, Entstehung, Struktur, Folgen des Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Ullstein, 1993).

4. A facsimile of this document appears on the cover of Saul Friedlander, *Der Weg zum NS-Genozid: Von Euthanasie zur Endlösung* (Berlin: Berlin Verlag, 1997).

The only indications that Hitler gave a written or oral order to Himmler<sup>5</sup> came from relatively minor witnesses, such as Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, Wisliceny, a subordinate of Eichmann, and Eichmann himself. But the main witnesses, the key players with insider knowledge about the decision-making process and the way in which decisions were implemented were dead or had vanished by the end of the war. The chain of command for implementing the “Final Solution to the Jewish question” started with Hitler as supreme leader. Next in line were Reichsführer Himmler, Heydrich (chief of the RSHA and official in charge of the “Final Solution”), Müller (his subordinate and head of the Gestapo), and Eichmann (head of Department IVb4). Only Eichmann survived the war, and he claimed he received an order from Hitler via Heydrich to proceed with total extermination. However, his accounts from memory, foggy to say the least, and his multiple exculpation strategies shed little light on the way events unfolded.<sup>6</sup> The three indirect witnesses quoted above belonged to the RSHA or the WVHA (the Main Economic and Administrative Department), which was in charge of the concentration camps, something that is no coincidence. All three were informed of the “Final Solution to the Jewish question” – a classified affair of state – in their lines of duty. Other than the material provided by the circle of those directly overseeing the “Final Solution,” little documentation exists. Apparently, Hitler never addressed the topic with anyone not directly involved. The Goebbels diaries provide a gripping account of the way Hitler expressed himself on this matter. According to the accounts of the Minister of Propaganda and Berlin Gauleiter, Hitler never missed an opportunity to unleash violent anti-Semitic tirades, reiterating his unwavering disdain of Jews and arguing that a hard-line stance was necessary. However, according to Goebbels’ writings, Hitler never gave him detailed information. Only through indiscretions by other top Nazis did Goebbels learn in late March 1942 what the “Final Solution” actually meant for Polish Jews, namely extermination in the gas chambers of Belzec.<sup>7</sup>

However, during the same period, a public propaganda campaign was underway to promote anti-Jewish policy, and top Reich officials, including Hitler himself, were delivering speeches in favor of it.<sup>8</sup> The “Final Solution,” as we know,

5. See Christopher Browning, “Zur Genesis der ‘Endlösung’: Eine Antwort an Martin Broszat,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 1 (1981): 96-104.

6. On Eichmann’s testimonies, see Christian Gerlach “The Eichmann Interrogations in Holocaust Historiography,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 15 (2001): 428-52; Irmtrud Wojak, *Eichmanns Memoiren: Ein kritischer Essay* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2001); Christopher Browning, “Perpetrator Testimony: Another Look at Adolf Eichmann,” *Collected Memories: Holocaust History and Postwar Testimonies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2003).

7. Goebbels’ wartime diaries were compiled and annotated by Elke Frölich and published by Saur in Munich in the 1990s. For more on Goebbels’ knowledge of gassing, see Florent Brayard, *Auschwitz, enquête sur un complot nazi* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2012).

8. See Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda During World War II and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006); Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*.

was foreshadowed in Hitler's "prophetic" speech of January 30, 1939, which he later postdated to September 1, 1939, and in which he states the following:

If the world of international financial Jewry, both in and outside of Europe, should succeed in plunging the nations into another *world war*, the result will not be the Bolshevization of the world and thus a victory for Judaism. The result will be the extermination of the Jewish race in Europe.<sup>9</sup>

At a dinner on February 10, 1945, Hitler exclaimed:

I have fought openly against the Jews. I gave them a last warning at the outbreak of the war. I never left them in uncertainty that if they were to plunge the world into war again, this time, they would not be spared – that the vermin would be finally eradicated in Europe.<sup>10</sup>

Between the first and the last occasion on which he evoked his "prophecy" (he would do it again in his last will and testament before committing suicide), he repeatedly referred to it in his public speeches. In 1942, when industrial-scale slaughter began in earnest, Hitler referred publicly to his "prophecy" four times. Additionally, he alluded to it before another, more restricted audience that was no less politically influential, namely the Reichsleiters and Gauleiters, the highest ranking members of the National-Socialist party.

Goebbels recorded these words after a meeting Hitler had with members of his inner circle on December 12, 1941:

Regarding the Jewish question, the Führer is determined to clear the table. He warned the Jews that if they were to cause another world war, it would lead to their own destruction. Those were not empty words. Now the world war has come. The destruction of the Jews must be its necessary consequence. We cannot be sentimental about it.<sup>11</sup>

Although the German public sphere was saturated, archival material is remarkably lacking. This contradiction gave rise to two stances and, at one time, sparked a debate that is no longer relevant today. On the one hand, those whom historiography classifies as "functionalists" (Martin Broszat, Hans Mommsen) claim that the lack of archival evidence of an order from Hitler proves that the

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*Nazi Germany and the Jews. 1939-1945* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007); Ian Kershaw, "Hitler's Role in the Final Solution," *Yad Vashem Studies* 34 (2006):7-43. See Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006); Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination. Nazi Germany and the Jews. 1939-1945* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007); Ian Kershaw, "Hitler's Role in the Final Solution," *Yad Vashem Studies* 34 (2006):7-43.

9. Christian Gerlach, "The Wannsee Conference, the Fate of German Jews, and Hitler's Decision in Principle to Exterminate All European Jews," *The Journal of Modern History* 70, no. 4. (Dec. 1998): 784.

10. Florent Brayard, *La "solution finale de la question juive," La technique, le temps et les catégories de la décision* (Paris: Fayard, 2005): 388.

11. Gerlach, "The Wannsee Conference," 785.

Führer did not issue a sweeping command. They see those two facts as a paradigmatic illustration of the fact that Hitler was simply a “weak dictator” atop a polycratic regime and whose speeches had symbolic rather than performative value.<sup>12</sup> Although functionalists were among the first to challenge him, non-academic historian David Irving can be added to that group. Exploiting the lack of documentary evidence, Irving claimed that the genocide took place behind Hitler’s back and that the dictator only found out about it after the fact in the fall of 1943.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, “intentionalists” such as Lucy Dawidowicz and Eberhardt Jäckel argue that the “prophecy” as well as some earlier statements (particularly in *Mein Kampf*) prove that a policy of genocide had been established before the war<sup>14</sup> and that the only question was when to implement it. Undoubtedly, final decisions were made in private meetings between Hitler and Himmler or Heydrich. However, the fact is that no one knows exactly what happened inside the Reich Chancellery or the Wolf’s Lair.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.

History sometimes springs surprises. The collapse of another form of totalitarianism, namely Russian communism, greatly advanced our understanding of Nazism. Suddenly, historians had access to an astonishing amount of archival material the Red Army had seized and kept classified for half a century. In his book *Endlösung*,<sup>16</sup> Götz Aly made extensive use of that material, radically altering our interpretation of the “Final Solution.” One of the most valuable discoveries was Himmler’s *Dienstkalender*, an appointment book in which he documented most of his meetings and jotted down brief notes about them, particularly those with Hitler. Since its publication, the *Dienstkalender* – a particularly difficult document – has become one of the major sources on the decision-making process. On December 18, 1941, Himmler listed the points (with a brief commentary) that he wanted to raise at a meeting with Hitler. One of these was: “*Judenfrage | als Partisanen auszurotten*” (Jewish question | to

12. Martin Broszat, “Hitler and the Genesis of the ‘Final Solution’: An Assessment of David Irving’s Theses,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 13 (1979): 73-125; Hans Mommsen, “La réalisation de l’utopique: La ‘solution finale de la question juive’ sous le troisième Reich,” in *Le national-socialisme et la société allemande: Dix essais d’histoire politique et sociale* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 1997).

13. David Irving, *Hitler’s War* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977). For a commentary on this historian’s later work, see Richard Evans, *Lying About Hitler: History, the Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

14. Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews. 1933-1945* (New York: Holt, 1975); Eberhardt Jäckel, *Hitlers Weltanschauung* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1981).

15. Only a few notes by Himmler were archived in Germany. See Martin Broszat and Czeslaw Madajczyk, “Hitler’s Direct Influence on Decisions Affecting Jews during World War II,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 20 (1990): 53-68; See also Leni Yahil, “Some Remarks about Hitler’s Impact on the Nazis’ Jewish Policy,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 22 (1993): 281-94.

16. Götz Aly, *Endlösung: Völkerverschiebung und der Mord an den europäischen Juden* (Frankfurt-am-Main: S. Fischer, 1995).

be exterminated as partisans). Apparently, the term "Jewish question" was not written at the same time as "to be exterminated as partisans," with the latter phrase written in slightly smaller characters than the others on the page.<sup>17</sup> In all likelihood, Himmler jotted down that statement as a side note while Hitler was addressing this "question" during their meeting. Thanks to that source, the door to Hitler's office finally cracked open.

In a magisterial paper that brought Himmler's note to the public's attention, historian Christian Gerlach referred to it as a key factor in pinning down "Hitler's decision in principle to exterminate all European Jews." One might even go so far as to say that Gerlach considered it the missing link and one he used as a spring board – along with a staggering number of secondary sources – to piece together a detailed thread of the events that occurred between the United States' entry into the war and the Wannsee Conference. According to Gerlach, the shift to total extermination occurred over three phases: (i) a personal and psychological decision, which is obviously hard to pin down;<sup>18</sup> (ii) the roundabout yet explicit announcement of this decision to the highest ranking members of the Party at the meeting with Reichsleiters and Gauleiters on December 12 (see above)<sup>19</sup>; and (iii) the actual order itself – "Jewish Question | To be exterminated as partisans" – issued to Himmler on December 18. Although Gerlach admits the ambiguous nature of this statement, he suggests that it constitutes an order, saying, "Linguistically, the statement is an order."<sup>20</sup> The next step was the Wannsee Conference, at which the Führer's decision was announced to senior officials from the ministries that would implement it.<sup>21</sup>

However, the pressing question has less to do with the substance of this plot than with how it related to the context. At the time that Hitler is supposed to have made and announced his decision, over half a million Russian Jews had already been murdered in the German-occupied territories by the *Einstazgruppen* and security forces. Moreover, the Chelmno extermination camp had just become operational, Belzec was already being built, and the first criminal gassing with Zyklon B in Auschwitz had taken place three months earlier. In October, the first transportations of German Jews to the East were launched, with only a few being executed on arrival at Kaunas and Minsk, which, in the case of the latter at least, enraged Himmler. This sums up the state of affairs before

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17. Andrej Angrick, Christoph Dieckmann, Christian Gerlach, Peter Klein, Dieter Pohl, Martina Voigt, Michael Wildt, and Peter Witte, *Der Dienstkalender Heinrich Himmlers 1941/42* (Hamburg: Christians, 1999).

18. Gerlach, "The Wannsee Conference," 760 note 7.

19. Gerlach, "The Wannsee Conference," 785.

20. Gerlach, "The Wannsee Conference," 780. Note that the German term *Weisung* has other translations that are not as strong as the one used in the original English version of this paper.

21. Gerlach, "The Wannsee Conference," 793sq. For more on the administrative aspect, see Eberhardt Jäckel, "On the Purpose of the Wannsee Conference," in *Perspectives on the Holocaust: Essays in Honor of Raul Hilberg*, ed. James S. Pacy and Alan P. Wertheimer (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

Hitler's "order." With regard to its aftermath, surprisingly, many months passed before the "Final Solution" assumed the form that would be its historical legacy. In effect, not until mid-August 1942, or over eight months later, was construction approved for the four industrial-scale combined crematoria and gas chambers at Auschwitz. Although not operational until early the following year, these marked the transition to generalized and rapid extermination and provided the means of implementing the "solution." However, as early as May, Jews from Upper Silesia, the region where the camp was located, had already been gassed using provisional methods. In the General Government, under German civil administration, Jews began being gassed at Belzec and Sobibor in March, albeit at a much slower pace than occurred later.<sup>22</sup> This was a real contradiction that Gerlach handled with great skill, but which other historians also had to deal with. Indeed, since most of them finally reached consensus following Alfred Streim's<sup>23</sup> assertion that an order for total extermination could not have preceded the invasion of the USSR early in the summer of 1941, implying that the decision must have been made *during the course of a process* leading up to the summer of 1942 at the latest that would ultimately result in generalized massacre within a short timeframe.

Gerlach bases his reconstruction of the Nazi decision-making process on Himmler's note, and that document has since become a mandatory source for all historians in this field regardless of their views on the way that process unfolded over time. Not only have they made technical and erudite arguments painting different pictures of the relationship between the decision-making process and the general evolution of anti-Jewish policy, but they have also tried to determine what the statement "To be exterminated as partisans" meant. Simply put, Gerlach's analysis has been challenged on multiple grounds: the scope and intent of Hitler's words, their singularity, and their being interpreted as an order.

In an excellent overview of the evolution of the "extermination policy," Peter Longerich sees that statement as merely "a renewed confirmation on Hitler's part that the mass murders of Soviet Jews were to be continued and intensified, albeit with the reservations already given."<sup>24</sup> According to Longerich, the term "partisans" could only be referring to Soviet Jews, whereas for Gerlach, the fact that these Jews were already being killed, along with the broadness of the term "Jewish Question," precludes such a narrow interpretation: "partisans" must have referred to "potential partisans and to the supposed 'Jewish threat.'"<sup>25</sup>

22. Florent Brayard, *La "solution finale de la question juive": La technique, le temps, et les catégories de la décision* (Paris: Fayard, 2004).

23. Alfred Streim, *Die Behandlung sowjetischer Kriegsgefangener im "Fall Barbarossa"* (Heidelberg: Müller, 1981).

24. Peter Longerich, *Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews* (Oxford: University Press, 2010), 306, 542 note 5.

25. Gerlach, "The Wannsee Conference," 781.



In addition, Longerich claims that Nazi decision making was diluted in phases of increasing radicalization over a lengthy period leading up to the spring of 1942. Of course, Hitler played a key role, but this view does not admit the making of a decision of such magnitude. Furthermore, according to his analysis, the Wannsee Conference was not just about planning the assassination of all Jews but also about a plan drawn up by the RSHA chief for the "resettlement" of Jews who were able to work in the East as forced labor. Clearly, in both cases, death was the intended outcome, but the way of achieving that end differed. Longerich's analysis thus reexamines the meaning of "partisans" and "extermination" as well as the exceptional nature of the instruction insofar as this "confirmation" followed other decisions made with similar motives. However, other historians argue that Hitler's statement was a general one, with no performative value. Christopher Browning, for instance, interpreted Himmler's "cryptic" remark in these terms: "Most likely, they discussed how the killing of the Jews was to be justified and what were the rules for speaking about it."<sup>26</sup> Suffice it to say, those rules must have been very loose, because they were not used by the administrative authorities, contrary, for example, to terms such as "special treatment" or "emigration." Of course, the "justification" could have been cited months or years later, during, for example, bilateral talks. It could even have served as a recurrent theme in the claims of the head negotiator, Hitler. Both he and Himmler could have argued this way in speeches after the extermination of the Jews was achieved. All the same, that statement should not be interpreted as referring to rules of language but rather as an example of the way in which Hitler or Himmler referred to Jews in the course of the decision-making process.<sup>27</sup> That is the first point. Browning does not refer to the reason for the genocide but rather to the reason to give for it, which reduces the scope of Hitler's statement to almost nothing. The fact that he downplays the importance of the statement is not surprising since, according to him, most key decisions were made during a "euphoric" period when victory was all but guaranteed. However, labeling Jews as "partisans" and, as such, going to the trouble of exterminating them was tantamount to admitting that they posed such a serious threat to the outcome of the war that they had to be wiped out.

This later interpretation was that of Saul Friedländer, who reformulated Gerlach's thesis in broader terms. To him, Himmler's note

referred to the deadly internal enemy, the enemy fighting within the borders of one's own territory, who, by plotting and treachery could, as in 1917-18, stab the Reich in the back now that a new "world war," on all fronts, rekindled all the dangers of the previous one. Moreover, "partisans" associated maybe with the

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26. Christopher Browning with Jürgen Matthäus, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 2004), 410.

27. Brayard, *La "solution finale de la question juive,"* 436.

most general connotation used by Hitler in his declaration at the conference of July 16, 1941: All *potential enemies* within Germany's reach; it was understood, as we saw, to include any civilians and entire communities at will. Thus, the order was clear: extermination without any limitation here applied to the Jews.<sup>28</sup>

In both cases therefore, interpretations hinge on the general political or ideological significance attributed to the event – the Holocaust – but also on the timeframe used to reconstruct it.

One reason Browning reduced Himmler's note to a simple question of language was because, in his eyes, it could not have been an order since that decision had already been made on two separate occasions (in July and October). On the other hand, Friedländer, without getting entangled in Gerlach's circumlocutions, does view it as an order because, according to him and other historians,<sup>29</sup> the United States' entry into the war marked the moment when the shift to generalized killing occurred. These conflicting interpretations illustrate a point: just as a door was cracked open, historians faced the task of untangling different hypotheses and conjectures.

### 3.

On September 22, 1942, Himmler wrote another vague statement about a topic he intended to bring up at his meeting with Hitler: "Jewish emigration: what are the next steps?"<sup>30</sup> Himmler's use of the word "emigration" shows how careful he was about using coded language, even in his personal notes.

In reality, he was referring to killing. Auschwitz, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, and Chelmno had been fully operational since early that summer, hundreds of thousands of Jews from all over Europe had already been exterminated there, and widespread executions were underway in the eastern territories. This time, the Reichsführer did not take a single note about the meeting. He simply placed a check beside this point, indicating that it had been addressed. What was said? In this case, we have a good idea of the various topics that were addressed because several decisions made at the meeting were documented elsewhere.

Generally speaking, Hitler informed his subordinates of various decisions he had made with regard to Jewish forced laborers.<sup>31</sup> All went against Himmler's plans. In the General Government, his plan for concentrating the Jewish population within a few production areas was rejected. Hitler refused to approve Himmler's large-scale plan to build concentration camp factories inside the

28. Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, 280.

29. In addition to Gerlach, see L.J. Hartog, *Der Befehl zum Judenmord: Hitler, Amerika, und die Juden* (Bodenheim: Syndicat, 1997).

30. Angrick et al, *Der Dienstkalender Heinrich Himmlers 1941/42*, 566.

31. Brayard, *La "solution finale de la question juive"*, 151.

German homeland. As a consequence, the order was given immediately thereafter to transfer all Jewish concentration camp prisoners to Auschwitz and Majdanek.

The two men may have also spoken of the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp from a different angle as a few days prior, Himmler had reached an agreement with Minister of Armaments and War Production Albert Speer and secured funding for this camp's expansion, which included the construction of the industrial-scale gassing and cremation facilities needed to achieve the “Final Solution.” We can also assume that Hitler and Himmler addressed the French situation as that very morning, the Reichsführer learned that Eichmann's representative in Paris wanted to organize a massive roundup, in blatant violation of the agreements the two countries had so painstakingly negotiated. A few days later, he prohibited it.

Lastly, the two men discussed the behavior of Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, who had just taken over talks on deportations from allied countries which, until then, had been under Himmler's delegates' charge, and halted the process, much to the Reichsführer's dismay. The next day, Hitler called a meeting with von Ribbentrop. He reprimanded him so severely that the German ambassador to Denmark received word of the incident. The next day, von Ribbentrop sent a telegram to every office under his command, ordering his subordinates to hasten negotiations, which had been too drawn out. This meeting illustrates the fact that Hitler did not merely sign off on proposals from his subordinates who used to work “towards the Führer”<sup>32</sup> as it was sometimes described. All outstanding issues, some months old and some recent, were addressed, and Hitler issued his verdicts. In some cases, he agreed with his subordinates; in others, he did not. Clearly, Hitler called the shots.

A similar reconstruction of December 18, 1941, is hard to produce for one simple reason: radicalization was already detectable before then, and certain officials had already been informed of it. According to Gerlach, a point of contention among the different services involved in one capacity or another with the killing of Soviet Jews had most likely been settled in the preceding days. The disagreement was about whether to spare enough Jewish workers to keep the economy running in an already devastated region or to condemn them all to the same fate. The answer came in a letter from a section chief at the Ministry for the East sent on December 18: “As for the Jewish question, oral discussions that have taken place in the meantime have brought about clarification. As a general rule, economic factors should not be considered in deciding the matter.”<sup>33</sup> Gerlach claims (probably rightly) that the term “oral discussions” refers directly to Hitler's speech on December 12 or to “higher-level” discussions held during that meeting. But did

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32. This concept was developed by Ian Kershaw in “Hitler's Role.”

33. Gerlach, “The Wannsee Conference,” 789.

Hitler himself provide this clarification, as one second-hand witness suggested?<sup>34</sup> That seems unlikely since if he issued “clarifications,” the Führer would certainly not have done so in the course of informal discussions.

However, the General Government illustrates the importance of the oral aspect of Nazi decision making. At a meeting on December 16, Governor Hans Frank referred to the dramatic shift in anti-Jewish policy in the territory he governed. A few days earlier on December 12, he had traveled to Berlin to attend the meeting of Reichsleiters and Gauleiters, where he intended to bring up the “Jewish question” again. For nearly two years, he had been trying to convince Hitler to approve a sweeping project for the removal of Jews from his territory, but received only evasive promises. What he heard was not at all what he expected: “But what is going to happen to these Jews? Do you imagine there will be settlement villages for them in the Ostland? In Berlin we were told: Why are you making all this trouble for us? There is nothing we can do with them here in the Ostland or in the Reich Commissariat. Liquidate them yourselves!”<sup>35</sup> Note the use of, “In Berlin, we *were told* . . .” But who was it who told them this? Here again, it is unlikely that Frank would have recorded statements by the Führer without specifying the speaker. Most likely, Alfred Rosenberg, Reich Minister of the Occupied Eastern Territories, and Hans Frank had informal discussions with Himmler or Heydrich, the two men charged with the design and implementation of the “Final Solution.” In addition, Rosenberg and Frank’s rank in the chain of command was comparable to the Reichsführer’s. Over the previous three months, they had been struggling to wrestle control over the handling of Jews in their respective territories away from Himmler. These discussions could have taken place on the sideline of the meeting on December 12, which was attended by all Party leaders (except perhaps Heydrich) or, less likely in my view, in the days that followed.

Whatever the case, as Frank attests, the “Final Solution” was still in the early stages:

Here are 3.5 million Jews that we can’t shoot, we can’t poison. But there are some things we can do, and one way or another these measures will successfully lead to a liquidation. They are related to the measures under discussion with the Reich . . . Where and how this will all take place will be a matter for offices that we will have to establish and operate here.

If Himmler or Heydrich did inform the relevant officials of decisions regarding the fate of Soviet Jewish workers and Jews in the General Government, then a key question arises: had the two men previously differed with Hitler on the matter? Himmler had met with Hitler several times since the United States

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34. Gerlach, “The Wannsee Conference,” note 135.

35. Gerlach, “The Wannsee Conference,” 790.

entered the war. There are some indications that the "Jewish question" was not addressed at their meetings and that military issues were prioritized, since the Red Army had just launched its counter-offensive.<sup>36</sup> But there is no definitive proof of this, since Himmler's appointment book contains gaps for the period, and no archival material exists proving that Heydrich even met Hitler, much less what they might have said to each other. There is, however, a more logical reason why the answer to the question above is "no." Had Himmler and Hitler discussed anti-Jewish policy in the preceding days, why then, on December 18, would Himmler have gone to the trouble of putting a point so broad and vague – and fundamental – as the "Jewish question" on the agenda for the meeting?

In my view, Himmler wanted to reexamine the sequence of events following the speech Hitler gave a week earlier on December 12. With the context being changed by the United States' entry into the war and the confidential speech on December 12, he and Heydrich authorized themselves to take a number of initiatives without Hitler's explicit and formal approval.

In my view, these initiatives and eventual decisions need to be put into better perspective. Killings had been on the rise since the previous summer in occupied Soviet territory, and it is very clear that the escalation of those massacres would sooner or later lead to a regional genocide. As we know, specific orders were issued first to kill Jews with positions in the Communist administration; then, those belonging to the Communist Party were killed; then all men of arms-bearing age were murdered; women and children were killed starting in August and, by the end of the summer, entire communities were being wiped out with unimaginable ruthlessness. In two days, 33,000 Jews were executed in Babi Yar. Although the civil administration generally supported the idea of keeping Jewish workers, the increasingly influential security forces considered that unnecessary.<sup>37</sup> The clarification that "as a general rule, economic factors should not be considered in deciding the matter" simply empowered the security forces and permitted radical solutions to relatively localized disagreements – which sometimes reached Berlin – between various Nazi officials. The case of the General Government is even more revealing. Evidence suggests that Himmler simply informed Hans Frank, the Civil Governor, about a policy the principle of which had been established weeks earlier, undoubtedly with Hitler's full approval. In mid-October, Himmler approved the construction of an experimental extermination camp at Belzec, mostly likely on the recommendation of his on-site representative, Odilo Globocnik, Chief of Police in the Lublin district and the man tasked with the ethnic reorganization of this territory. Moreover, the initial

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36. Angrick et al, *Der Dienstkalender Heinrich Himmlers 1941/42*, 292 and note 55.

37. On the evolution of anti-Jewish policy in Soviet territories, see Jürgen Matthäus, "Operation Barbarossa and the Onset of the Holocaust," in *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942*, ed. Christopher Browning (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 2004), 244; see also Brayard, *La "solution finale de la question juive"*, 276.

guest list for the Wannsee Conference drawn up in late November included no representative from the General Government. In my view, this meant that this territory was exempt from the “Final Solution” as Heydrich would describe it at the meeting.<sup>38</sup> (I will return to this point.) Moreover, a third set of initiatives must also be taken into account. During the same period, Himmler met with top officials from Hitler’s Chancellery and secured the transfer to Belzec of a relatively small group of personnel who had participated in Operation T4 and thus had experience with gassing.<sup>39</sup>

It is possible that Hitler approved Himmler’s actions when the two met on December 18. Whether or not Hitler accepted all his subordinate’s proposals is uncertain. In effect, over the next six months, the process of exterminating Jews in the General Government was a balancing act between Himmler’s large-scale plans and much more limited enforcement on the ground. In mid-March, Himmler traveled to Lublin for the opening of the Belzec camp. That is precisely the date of the first known plan regarding the implementation of anti-Jewish policy in this territory. In effect, Himmler told Hans Frank that he wanted a little more than half of the 1.5-1.8 million Jews in this territory eliminated within the year. Those left alive would be used for labor.

However, despite what some camp leaders might have claimed, it is uncertain whether Belzec and Sobibor (the latter of which was still under construction at the time) had the means to achieve Himmler’s objective, while the Treblinka camp would not be built before mid-April, opening some months later in mid-July. In parallel to those events, multiple signs suggest that the number of eastern Jews exterminated in the General Government during the first half of the year correlates with the number of German Jews being deported there: the killing of local Jews was supposed to “make space” for German Jews. In late spring, local officials were still awaiting a final decision on how to conduct the operation. That decision probably came in June, or in July at the latest, when Himmler visited and ordered the entire Jewish population “evacuated” except for up to 300,000 Jewish workers. However, this decision was an obvious sign a radicalization was underway: by the end of 1942, it had resulted in the killing of no less than 85% of the Jewish population. We can surmise that Himmler related a plan in March that had not yet received Hitler’s approval but that he did finally approve and escalate at the end of spring.<sup>40</sup> In any event, the case of the General Government as well as that of the Soviet territories – where the killings dropped off that winter only to resume in force in the spring of 1942 – suggests that “to be exterminated as partisans” was not an order to proceed with immediate and

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38. For more on the evolution of plans for the General Government, see Brayard, *La “solution finale de la question juive,”* 368-77.

39. Gerlach, “The Wannsee Conference,” 782.

40. Brayard, *La “solution finale de la question juive,”* 43-4.

indiscriminate extermination. In sum, that statement merely validated the possibility of resorting to murder on a greater or lesser scale. The essential point is this also means that a portion of the Jews – sometimes a very high proportion – should not be exterminated immediately. Although half the Jews in the General Government were to survive through 1942, we do not know what plans were in place in late 1941 to early 1942 regarding how long after that date they would be allowed to live. That is an important point because during the same period, the development plans for the Eastern territories spanned more than twenty years and foresaw the use of Jewish forced laborers.<sup>41</sup>

An additional possibility is that the words Himmler jotted down also served a different purpose, as putting Jews in the category of "partisans" might have been a way to provide a legal basis for murdering them. However, that argument does not hold up in light of the population initially targeted by the Nazis. Indeed, in the General Government, those the civil and police authorities wanted to get rid of first were those who were unable to work – housewives, children, the elderly, and the sick, in other words the population least likely to behave like "partisans."

#### 4.

All historians researching the "Final Solution" come up against the same problem, though not all acknowledge it, namely the apparently erratic nature of its implementation and the asynchrony between how it actually unfolded and how the decision-making process has been reconstructed. The issue of Jews deemed unfit for labor provides a decisive clue. In his work on the years of extermination, Friedländer portrays the Wannsee Conference as a striking example of a lack of preparation. In his view, Hitler's decision took Heydrich somewhat by surprise, making him unable to provide precise information about such important aspects as the date on which deportations would start, their scheduling, or the camps in which the Jews would be exterminated.<sup>42</sup> As we know, Heydrich laid out before top officials at the conference a relatively complex plan for the "Final Solution":

"Another possible solution to the problem has now taken the place of emigration, i.e., the evacuation of the Jews to the east, provided that the Führer gives the appropriate approval in advance. [...] In the course of the Final Solution, the Jews are to be allocated for appropriate labour in the East. Able-bodied Jews, separated according to sex, will be taken in large work columns to these areas to work on roads, in the course of which action doubtless a large portion will be eliminated by natural wastage. The possible final remnant will, since it will undoubtedly consist of the most resistant portion, have to be

41. Brayard, *La "solution finale de la question juive,"* 418.

42. Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, 339ff, particularly 344.



treated accordingly, because it is the product of natural selection, and would, if released, act as a seed of a new Jewish revival.”<sup>43</sup>

Obviously, that plan was genocidal since no Jews were to survive. The plan consisted of several phases: deportation, forced labor that would be so demanding and lengthy that most Jews would die from it, and, at a non-specified date, the extermination of the remaining population (“treated accordingly”).

A key point in Friedländer’s analysis (as well as those by some of his contemporaries<sup>44</sup>) is the fate of non-working Jews, about whom Heydrich said nothing: “But what of all the others, the unmentioned vast majority of European Jewry? Heydrich’s silence about their fate stated loudly that these non-working Jews would be exterminated.”<sup>45</sup> However, the oxymoronic “loud silence” could have had another meaning, namely that it was obvious to everyone that the weakest Jews (or those unfit for work) would be “eliminated by natural causes” much sooner than the others. The fact is that no preparations followed the decision to kill all non-working Jews, or possibly more than half of the 11 million people covered under the plan. It was not until August 1942 that, following the order to build four massive cremation and gassing structures, Auschwitz became the camp that made implementing such a measure possible. Could a lack of preparation have led to practical inefficiency? Additionally, it should be pointed out that until late May 1942, the deportation of German and Slovakian Jews followed a different plan from the one laid out for local Jews in the General Government. Since these Jews “took the place” of local Jews, they would not be exterminated on arrival despite many of them falling under the category of “non-working Jews” destined for destruction and despite the availability of extermination sites nearby (Sobibor and Belzec).<sup>46</sup> If a tentative timetable was in place during this period indicating when the program would be launched in full, these inconsistencies can be resolved. That is the view of Browning, who claims that in the fall of 1941, Nazi leaders were resolute about following a specific timetable. German Jews, for example, were deported to Riga or Minsk, there to wait for resettlement “further East” after the military campaign ended or in the spring. Both indications of timing meant the same thing since everyone thought that fighting would be over by that spring. By early December, with the United States’ entry into the war and the Soviet counter-offensive underway around Moscow, it was clear that this would not

43. English translation from [historylearningsite.co.uk](http://historylearningsite.co.uk). Accessible online at [www.historylearningsite.co.uk/wannsee\\_conference.htm](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/wannsee_conference.htm).

44. Mommsen, “*La réalisation de l’utopique*,” 214; Mark Roseman, “Ordre du jour: Génocide le 20 janvier 1942.” *La conférence de Wannsee et la solution finale* (Paris: Louis Audibert, 2002), 107.

45. Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, 341.

46. Friedländer suggests that the German Jews could not have been exterminated until the Reichstag approved a motion making Hitler the chief legal authority, thereby freeing him from any legal burden (*The Years of Extermination*, 337). See also Brayard, *La “solution finale de la question juive,”* 437ff.



be the case. As Browning writes: ". . . the conflict between the two [timetables] had to be resolved. Hitler's remarks [in his speech of December 12] made it clear that the 'Final Solution' would go forward 'next spring' and would not be delayed until 'after the war.'"<sup>47</sup> Here, the objections raised to Friedländer's work are relevant, but so are others. While Himmler, as we have seen, had a specific plan for solving the "Jewish question" in the General Government (which, like the eastern territories, was not covered by the "Final Solution" as described in the Wannsee Protocol), Heydrich had a very clear idea of the timeframe for deportations from the Western occupied territories and, most likely, from all allied countries of the Reich.<sup>48</sup> In fact, he only allocated a few transportations (one at first, and five more later) for deportations from the Occupied Zone of France, for which Eichmann's representative in France had been pressing so urgently. He wanted to postpone the start of large-scale deportations to 1943, if it was possible, a fact that both Browning and Friedländer neglect to mention.<sup>49</sup> In the meantime, deportations from Germany were carried out using alternative methods. For instance, trains carrying agricultural goods from the General Government inside the Reich were supposed to return empty, but were instead refilled with German Jews.<sup>50</sup> Yet Browning does not mention this significant point. Of course, the fortuitous organization of deportations was partially due to a scarcity of means of transportation. However, I believe this argument to be far from conclusive. Heydrich may have approved only six transportations for France for all of 1942 (and none for Belgium or Holland), yet each day, thousands of Nazi trains were transporting soldiers, goods, and workers all over Europe. It would appear therefore that during this period the "Final Solution" enjoyed no priority at all in terms of transport allocations.<sup>51</sup> While delays in deportations from Germany were not looked on favorably (as demonstrated by the use of alternative methods), nothing suggests that the timetable Heydrich outlined in March 1942 contradicted the one he outlined two months earlier at the Wannsee Conference. The fact that Heydrich did not set a timetable for deportations from allied countries simply meant that he was putting them off to a more or less distant future. That moment came in the summer of 1942 in the wake of an unexpected turn of events, when Heydrich was assassinated.

In the accounts of Browning and Friedländer, the sharp contrast between the first months of the year on the one hand, when the "Final Solution" consisted of a deportation program of secondary importance surely intended to span

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47. Browning, *The Origins*, 408.

48. In my view, Slovakia constitutes an exception due to its proximity to the General Government (where Slovakian Jews were deported), the Slovakian government's supply of transportation vehicles, and its documented criminal opportunism.

49. Brayard, *La "solution finale de la question juive,"* 109; Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, 377.

50. Brayard, *La "solution finale de la question juive,"* 410-11; Longerich, *Holocaust*, 321.

51. No evidence exists that high-ranking Nazis tried to free up means of transportation to deport Jews. That changed a few months later in July 1942. Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, 508.

several years and whose implementation depended more on fortuitous circumstances than political will, and late spring and summer, on the other hand, when all-out extermination got underway for the first time, is blurred by one fact. The first transportation of German Jews from Beuthen and surrounding areas (near the former German-Polish border) was supposed to have been in mid-February 1942, when they were to be taken to Auschwitz and exterminated in temporary gas chambers, thereby turning Birkenau into an extermination camp. Both authors implicitly depict this deportation as a direct consequence of the Wannsee Conference.<sup>52</sup> They see the event as the first repercussion of the conference barely a month after it was held and as proof that plans were made there to gas non-working Jews. In my view, that interpretation creates a false continuity between two periods with very different features. It is false, because the date typically attributed to this deportation is incorrect, as it did not occur in mid-February as usually claimed, but in mid-May. This mistake can be attributed to what might be called the “circularity of knowledge.” In a literature review, I found that all references to this date refer to one or two sources. The first is a footnote by Martin Broszat in the 1958 edition of Rudolf Höss’s memoirs,<sup>53</sup> and the second is Danuta Czech’s *Auschwitz Chronicle*. However, in a footnote, Czech cites Broszat without verifying it against outside confirmation, which means that those two sources are one and the same<sup>54</sup>, namely the footnote in which Broszat cites a letter from the International Committee of the Red Cross (IRC), which he claims indicates that the transportation took place in mid-February. However, although this letter, which is archived at the Institut für Zeitgeschichte in Munich, does mention a deportation from Beuthen, it states that it took place in mid-May 1942, or three months later.<sup>55</sup> Several months passed, therefore, before the Wannsee Conference had criminal repercussions at Auschwitz, and it was not until that summer that it became the crux of an operation aimed at exterminating the European Jews.

Does the history of the “Final Solution” in the first half of 1942 therefore boil down to “regional variations, temporary exceptions and postponements, trial-and-error experimentation, and a remarkably unsystematic and gradual dissemination of the regime’s intentions” as Browning claims?<sup>56</sup> Clearly not. On the contrary, during the course of the political decision-making process, a

52. Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, 359, 744, and note 97; Browning, *The Origins*, 421.

53. Martin Broszat, *Kommandant in Auschwitz: Autobiographische Aufzeichnungen des Rudolf Höss* (Munich: DTV, 1958/1989), 191 and note 2.

54. Danuta Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle: 1939-1945* (London: Taurus, 1990), 135. Czech’s reference to Pery Broad’s recollections is not a reliable source of chronological information because his account is too vague. See also *KL Auschwitz seen by the SS Rudolf Höss, Pery Broad, and Johann Paul Kremer* (Warsaw: Interpress Publishers, 1991).

55. Brayard, *La “solution finale de la question juive,”* 422.

56. Christopher Browning, *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 33.

fundamental evolution took place from a state policy of total extinction – albeit one that permitted the large-scale killing of specific populations in some territories at certain times – to a state policy of indiscriminate and immediate killing.

## 5.

The history of words and the way in which they are used and have been in the past can form a trap without us even realizing it. That trap is their meaning. In the terms *Ausrottung* (eradication) and *Vernichtung* (extermination), we hear the death knells of Auschwitz or Treblinka. Yet recent work by Jeffrey Herf on propaganda sheds light on the fact that when Hitler spoke these notorious words, their meaning was broader than is realized today, i.e., murdering people in gas chambers. As we know, Hitler's "prophecy" encompassed two opposing exterminations: that of the German people by the Jews and their allies, as the propaganda tried to lead people to believe, and the other that of the Jewish people prophesied by Hitler himself. The peculiar figure of speech that is prophecy was commonly used by the highest Nazi officials, and prophetic discourse marked a semantic complex. Could part of it perhaps be missed by focusing solely on allusions to the extermination of Jews? This is a possibility to consider since, as we know, neither Hitler nor Goebbels ever specified in their speeches what the extermination or the eradication of Jews meant while, on the contrary, they gave specific meanings to those terms when using them in reference to the conspiracy the Jews were supposedly hatching against the German people. In February 1940, for instance, Goebbels gave a speech in which he mentioned France and Great Britain's plan to "annihilate the German people" by dismembering them and partitioning the country in the manner of Peace of Westphalia.<sup>57</sup> In the summer of 1941, an article appeared in which the Propaganda Minister described "a massive Jewish plan for extermination" (*Vernichtungsprogramm*). He portrayed a self-published booklet by an American quack, Theodore Kaufman, as describing a secret plan by the United States government to sterilize the entire German population so that Germans would become extinct within two generations and divide Germany among its neighbors. Goebbels and his propaganda team made extensive use of this ludicrous idea<sup>58</sup> whose content nevertheless cannot be equated with a call for outright killing. This development is even more striking in light of the fact that in early 1941, Himmler most likely envisioned a similar plan for the sterilization of Jews. He even had experts look into the matter.<sup>59</sup>

In his New Year's address in 1943, Hitler described the war as he usually did: as a struggle for the "existence or nonexistence" of the German people. The

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57. Herf, *The Jewish Enemy*, 66.

58. Herf, *The Jewish Enemy*, 112.

59. Brayard, La "solution finale de la question juive," 241ff.

way in which he presented the danger of annihilation is of particular interest: “The English and American Jews announce that it is the Allies’ intention to take the children away from the German people, slaughter millions of young men, split Germany up, and turn it permanently into a defenseless object for exploitation under capitalist or Bolshevik auspices.”<sup>60</sup> Here again, the stake was not total extermination since exploiting German people implied keeping them alive. Rather, it was a reversed image of the policy of subjugation and predation of the German occupants of the Eastern territories. On February 11, the *Völkische Beobachter* ran a headline that underscored Jews’ desire to “Exterminate the German People Culturally and Physically.” According to this article, not only were “Jewish advisers” trying to ruin the German economy, but they also wanted “German people to be exterminated in the literal sense of the term.” The article also mentioned plans for all German teachers to be shot after the war and replaced by Jewish teachers and for universities to be closed for a long period.<sup>61</sup> Here again, this portrayal of the “extermination of the German people” suggests that German children would not be killed but reeducated. On February 16, 1945, an article in *Zeitschriften-Dienst* stated what would happen should Germany lose the war, namely “the total extermination of the German people,” which could encompass disarmament of the country, destruction of industry, forced deportations, and “the extermination of our entire national elite, that is, our entire intelligentsia in every profession and class.”<sup>62</sup> One can recall that Germany had been ruthlessly implementing a very similar policy in occupied Poland since the fall of 1939, although this policy remained very different from the one that ultimately sealed the fate of the Jews. In all of these proclamations, Hitler and his accomplices created a semantic space in which “extermination” and “elimination” referred to genocide in the broad legal meaning Lemkin gave his neologism, but not necessarily to what, since the “Final Solution” and the Rwandan massacres, we usually call a “genocide,” i.e., the killing of an entire population or at least a very large portion of it.<sup>63</sup>

In his speech to top party officials on December 12, 1941, Hitler stated that his “prophecy” about the extermination of the Jews was not “an empty phrase” and that he was “determined to clear the table.” By doing so, Hitler placed himself and his audience in a familiar and specific semantic space. Clearly, the implementation of the anti-Jewish policy the regime had been designing for months would serve as the fulfillment of the “prophecy,” if we attribute to the term “extermination” the broader meaning it may have had at the time.

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60. Herf, *The Jewish Enemy*, 184.

61. Herf, *The Jewish Enemy*, 191.

62. Herf, *The Jewish Enemy*, 258.

63. This contradicts Herf’s claim – incorrect in my view – that it was clear to Germans that these two words were synonymous with mass murder, whether of Jews or Germans (Herf, *The Jewish Enemy*, 267). On the legal definition of genocide, see William A. Schabas, *Genocide in International Law: The Crimes of Crimes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Since at least the Madagascar Plan of the summer of 1940, which was known by German and even some foreign elites, it had become clear that Jews would have to leave Europe via forced resettlement. During the following year, an extinction mindset probably spread throughout the top Nazi ranks. This is demonstrated for example by Himmler's plans for sterilization or by various remarks made by Hitler. In August 1941, referring to the deportation of Jews to the east, the later stated: "There, under a harsh climate, they will be worked over."<sup>64</sup> However, not until December 1941 did the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question," understood as a program of total extinction, become a state policy, if not *the* policy of the Nazi state. The explicit outcome of the complex plan outlined by Heydrich at the Wannsee Conference in January 1942 – a combination of deportation, forced labor, a high "natural" mortality rate, and outright killing – was the death of all Europe's Jews within an unspecified timeframe. None of the officials present at the conference raised any serious objections. Not only did the plan for total extinction become state policy, but it did so with unanimous approval from all high-ranking state officials.

With all this in mind, we should go back and take a closer look at the December 18 meeting between Hitler and Himmler. As already pointed out, the two men almost certainly discussed partial measures, as they did in September 1942, including official announcements to a few directly concerned leaders and steps to free up specialized staff. They also looked at ways of justifying these unprecedented measures. However, something even more important may have happened. Let us return to the series of events following Hitler's speech to party leaders on December 12. As Kershaw points out, some members of the audience involved in some capacity with solving the "Jewish question" interpreted Hitler's repetition of his "prophecy" and his clarification that it was not a mere figure of speech as a message.<sup>65</sup> At least two of them, Himmler and Goebbels, both of whom had a special relationship with Hitler, tried to obtain a more thorough explanation. For months, Goebbels, Gaultleiter of Berlin, had been arguing for the swift deportation of Berlin's Jews. Finally, in mid-November, Heydrich informed him of the process to be used, which was later confirmed by Hitler: deportations from the Reich would be carried out one city at a time, with a new wave scheduled to start in January (it would eventually be postponed to a later date due to the Soviet counter-offensive). When Berlin's turn would come was not specified.<sup>66</sup> On December 17, Goebbels met with Hitler and asked him about the "Jewish question." Hitler replied: "All the Jews have to be transferred to the East. What happens to them there cannot be of great interest to us. They have brought this fate upon themselves."<sup>67</sup> This response

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64. Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, 238.

65. Kershaw, "Hitler's Role in the 'Final Solution.'"

66. Brayard, *La "solution finale de la question juive,"* 337-41.

67. Elke Fröhlich (ed.), *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, Part II, Section 2 (Munich: K.G. Saur, 1996), 534.

echoes the reference Hitler made four months earlier to the “hard climate” in the east, in which the Jews would be “worked over.” If a message was passed on, it meant nothing new for Goebbels. The next day, December 18, Himmler also sought more information. This is probably why he placed the “Jewish question” on the agenda for his meeting with Hitler. However, we have no way of knowing whether Hitler gave the Reichsführer and the Minister of Propaganda the same answer. Of course, the process Heydrich laid out a month later at the Wannsee Conference included the complex plan for evacuation and forced labor that had been prepared, as far as we know, over the preceding months and is congruent with the two remarks Hitler made to Goebbels. However, this plan included a new component, which demonstrates that Heydrich was not indifferent to the fate of the Jews after their transfer to Soviet territories, but rather had a vested interest in it. As Heydrich stated (and as already quoted above): “The possible final remnant will, since it will undoubtedly consist of the most resistant portion, have to be treated accordingly, because it is the product of natural selection, and would, if released, act as a seed of a new Jewish revival.” That statement is the first explicit reference to a policy aimed at the total extinction of Jews in Europe.

This is not to argue that the doctrine changed between December 17 and January 20, but rather that Hitler used criminal, yet vague words to satiate a Propaganda Ministry eager to know everything. If a change did occur, it happened beforehand and was communicated to Himmler on December 18. All historians claiming that a change did occur cite the testimonies of the only surviving witness, namely Eichmann.<sup>68</sup> After the war, Eichmann said that Heydrich summoned him after a meeting with Hitler and told him that the Führer had just ordered the “physical liquidation” of Jews, and then sent him to the General Government to review the methods they intended to use to liquidate the Jews there (the construction of Belzec having been underway for several weeks). A problematic witness with a highly unreliable memory, Eichmann gave several slightly different versions of this critical event, and the meaning of “physical liquidation” is therefore debatable. Suffice it to say that Eichmann realized that none of the Jews would survive the deportations he was coordinating and that outright murder would be conducted on a larger scale than he had previously thought. In such a case, Himmler’s note “to be exterminated as partisans” might have been a new clarification from Hitler. Not only was it possible that Jews *might* die, but they were all to die, or even, better said, none were to survive. To guarantee that outcome, recourse to murder was approved, and only the scale and timeframe had yet to be determined.

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68. See Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution*, 362ff.



## 6.

While many interpretations are possible, as we have seen, all signs point to what Gerlach called a "decision in principle to exterminate all Jews." Other decisions were indeed made before the summer of 1942, when the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question" took on the form of indiscriminate and fast-paced killing, but examining them would divert us too far from the matter at hand.<sup>69</sup> Nothing is shocking about the fact that the outbreak of a truly global war coincided exactly with the implementation of a policy intended to result in the total extinction of the Jewish people. That was precisely what Hitler's oft-repeated "prophecy" of January 1939 foretold. One could also argue that this "prophecy" did not refer to indiscriminate hate killings carried out solely for revenge – although revenge and hate were clearly present – but was rather the new expression of a fundamental doctrine that emerged in the wake of the Great War, according to which "partisans," or "inner enemies," brought about Germany's defeat. As the danger came into focus, it was necessary in order to avoid defeat to liquidate all domestic enemies, who undermined the cohesion of a nation at war and whose actions not only jeopardized victory but also hindered the harmonious reconstruction of a greatly weakened country. The events of 1918 could not be allowed to happen all over again. Of all domestic enemies, Jews were deemed the most dangerous. As such, they had to be the first victims as soon as defeat even became a possibility. That was essentially what Hitler had been saying since *Mein Kampf*. The genocide of Jews was a rational murder motivated by rudimentary logic. Yet it did not prevent defeat.

My interpretation of Himmler's note of December 18, 1941 – and more generally, my analysis of the series of events that took place between the attack on Pearl Harbor that brought the United States into the war and the Wannsee Conference – differs from existing accounts in that it establishes connections between several factors that these accounts treat separately. The notion that the "Final Solution" gradually grew more radical can thus be viewed as a reformulation of Mommsen's functionalist hypothesis of "cumulative radicalization." Peter Longerich subscribed to this hypothesis, and it plays a central role in Saul Friedländer's recent analysis. The hypothesis that this program evolved differently in different territories has a long history, dating back to Christian Streit's work from the early 1980s on killings in the USSR and the orders issued to the *Einsatzgruppen*. Gradually, most historians came to accept the claim that no order to exterminate Soviet Jews was issued before the launch of Operation Barbarossa. Later, the fact emerged that a specific evolution occurred in some territories, such as Warthegau, in which local officials played a decisive role.<sup>70</sup>

69. For more on these decisions, see Longerich, *Holocaust*, 356-360; Brayard, *La "solution finale de la question juive,"* 337-41; Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, 348.

70. Ian Kershaw, "Improvised Genocide? The Emergence of the 'Final Solution' in the 'Warthegau,'" *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6, no. 2 (1992): 51-78.

My claim is that the treatment of Soviet and Polish Jews in the General Government did not actually fall under the “Final Solution” as described in the Wannsee Protocol. Very simply, those two territories were excluded from the program’s scope of application but – and this is the key point – without anything else about the program being changed, their exclusion being through a series of changes to the geographical scope of this public policy. As Götz Aly showed, between 1939 and 1941, this policy expanded to cover more and more Jews across a wider area,<sup>71</sup> but in my view after this policy’s scope was expanded, it was subsequently narrowed, a development to which these two large Jewish communities fell victim.

In recent years, historians have subscribed to the view that the “Final Solution” stuck to plans or parts of plans outlined earlier (such as the forced labor of a high proportion of Jews, as Heydrich explicitly stated at Wannsee). This is the increasingly widely shared view held by Mommsen, Longerich, Gerlach, and Friedländer. The issue comes down to two questions: (i) to what extent were the original plans from Wannsee upheld, particularly with regard to non-working Jews? and (ii) when exactly did the meaning of the term “Final Solution” undergo substantial change and become a code name referring to objectives that were different from those set forth at the outset? I suspect that widespread killing within a short timeframe was not part of the scope of the “Final Solution” as it was presented at Wannsee. Of course, the ultimate objective was already the eventual elimination of all Jews, but this was a far cry from the policy for immediate and indiscriminate killing implemented in the late spring of 1942. For that reason, I think “policy of total extinction” is a more accurate term for this period than the term “Final Solution.”

This interpretation rests on two premises regarding the way the event evolved *over time*, an aspect other historians have largely neglected. The first concerns the speed with which the security apparatus responded. For example, the unexpected allocation in late February 1942 of means of transportation for the deportation of German Jews to the General Government catalyzed a series of complex actions in rapid succession, including: (i) discussions among top Nazi leaders regarding the cooperation of the local civil administration (to achieve this, Himmler even resorted to using blackmail and threats against Hans Frank); (ii) drawing up general instructions for carrying out the deportation; (iii) a new review by top officials of questions unanswered at Wannsee; and (iv) the start of the extermination of Jews in the General Government at Belzec.<sup>72</sup> The premise of a strong and swift institutional response suggests two possible interpretations for the lack of reaction by the state apparatus in critical moments: either the interpretation of what constituted a “critical moment” is at least partially

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71. Götz Aly, “Endlösung,” 169 and 198.

72. Brayard, *La “solution finale de la question juive,”* 410.



incorrect (nothing happened in Auschwitz until the spring because until then, no plan existed to exterminate Jews there), or the "Final Solution" was meant to span a longer period of time than is generally recognized. Just as the scope of this program shifted in both directions between 1939 and 1941, its timeframe also underwent major changes. Initially, the Nazis thought in terms of generations (as in the case of the plan for total sterilization Himmler looked into in early 1941). Ultimately, in June 1942, the decision was made that all Jews had to be dead within one year.<sup>73</sup>

## 7.

Some might argue that determining whether or not plans were made at Wannsee to put all "unproductive" Jews to death is of no importance since they would be killed anyway a few months later. In recent years, historians have generally come into alignment with regard to the decision-making process. In fact, little separates Browning's claim that the decision to exterminate the Jews was made in September-October 1941 from the claim of Gerlach or Friedländer that it was not made until December. However, in this case, chronology is fundamental to drawing an overall picture of the event. A significant difference exists between Browning's view that Hitler decided to kill Jews at the "height of the euphoria" when he thought victory was certain, and those of Burrin,<sup>74</sup> Gerlach, Kershaw, Friedländer, and myself that the decision was made when the possibility of defeat began to dawn on him. Indeed, these two views portray the people being killed in different lights. In Browning's view, they were "racialized" Jews whom nature had condemned to eternal evil; in the other, they were placed under the political category of "inner enemies," which Hitler perceived as a danger in the present and the foreseeable future. However, this difference of views is an exception in our field as most historians agree on the essential points, while only minor points remain to be settled.

Why is the Nazi decision-making process – a relatively narrow field and a sub-discipline of the history of the extermination of the Jews – one of the hottest topics in contemporary history? Browning was right to point out that historians are obsessed with determining the nature of Hitler's decision and the precise moment at which it was made.<sup>75</sup> In this, historians are motivated by several factors, among which are a desire to solve a puzzling and enigmatic historiographical issue<sup>76</sup> but also traditional academic rivalries, which I hope will one

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73. Various archival sources suggest that in June 1942, Himmler, with Hitler's approval, drew up a "confidential plan" for the Jews to be exterminated within a year. See Brayard, *La "solution finale de la question juive,"* 29.

74. Philippe Burrin, *Hitler et les Juifs: Genèse d'un génocide* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1989).

75. Christopher Browning, *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers*.

76. Édouard Husson's 2005 book ("*Nous pouvons vivre sans les juifs.*" *Novembre 1941. Quand et comment ils décidèrent de la solution finale* [Paris: Perrin]) illustrates this trend wonderfully, especially the opening phrase: "The 'Wannsee mystery' endures."

day be analyzed through the lens of sociology. However, since the historian is that person looking for the way home with the prematurely withdrawn help of a friend, I would argue that the major motivating factor is a feeling of responsibility vis-à-vis one's home. That home is a metaphor for truth. Of course, the term "truth" carries many meanings, one of which has an air of finality that is incompatible with the way in which a historian latches on to an event and never lets go: *historia longa, vita brevis*. In each case, that house is a laboriously built structure that is always subject to change. Sometimes it is unstable, and structural flaws threaten to make it collapse. That house will always be a work in progress, perpetually in need of additions, reinforcements, and corrections. In the case of the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question," the house is neither welcoming nor accommodating. This might be what René Char was expressing after the war when he entitled one of his poems "*Le Bouge de l'Historien*" (The Historian's Hovel), in which he writes: "*La pyramide des morts obsède la terre*" (The pyramid of the dead haunts the earth).<sup>77</sup>

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77. René Char, "Le bouge de l'historien," in "*Seuls demeurent*," *Fureur et mystère* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 47.

## Timeline

### 1939

- January 30: Hitler’s prophetic speech, proclaiming that Jews will be exterminated in the event of another world war. This speech was later backdated to September 1, 1939, the day the war started.

### 1941

- Summer: The *Einsatzgruppen* begins large-scale massacres of Jews in occupied Soviet territories. This soon turns into a regional genocide;

- September: First criminal gassings with Zyklon B at Auschwitz. The victims were Soviet political commissars and sick prisoners;

- October: Start of the deportation of German Jews to the East;

- Mid-October: Himmler authorizes the construction of the Belzec extermination camp, most likely with Hitler’s approval;

- December 4: First exterminations in the gas vans at Chelmno, in Reichsgau Wartheland;

- December 5: Soviet counter-offensive around Moscow;

- December 7: Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. US involvement in the war becomes inevitable;

- December 11: Hitler’s public speech, in which he declares war on the United States;

- December 12: Hitler’s secret speech to top party officials, in which he argues that his prophecy was not an “empty phrase” and claims that the extermination of the Jews will be the result of the outbreak of world war. Himmler or Heydrich informs the relevant officials that in the Eastern occupied territories, economic factors are not to be taken into account in anti-Jewish policy and that Jews in the General Government are not part of the “Final Solution,” but will be killed on site using methods not yet determined;

- December 17: Goebbels brings up the “Jewish question” in a meeting with Hitler but obtains no new information;

- December 18: Meeting between Hitler and Himmler, in which Himmler writes “Jewish question | to be exterminated as partisans” in his appointment book.

### 1942

- January 20: Wannsee Conference. Heydrich outlines the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question,” a complex plan without a timetable that foresees the deportation of all European Jews to the East, forced labor, the “natural” death of many, and the killing of the survivors;

- Mid-February: Date generally attributed to the first transportation of Jews to Auschwitz for extermination. In reality, this occurred three months later in mid-May;
- Late February: Eichmann finds a way to speed up the deportation of a new batch of German Jews to the General Government in the East. The administrative cogwheels start turning again;
- Early March: Heydrich indicates that the deportations of Jews from Western Europe will not occur in 1942. Only six transportations are approved for France;
- March 13-14: Himmler visits Lublin, where he informs Civil Governor Hans Frank of his plans for the region's Jewish community, leading to the liquidation of half of the community by the end of the year. No hard evidence exists that Hitler approved these plans. During the following month, the extermination takes place at a slower pace than called for by the Reichsführer;
- March 14-16: The Belzec extermination camp near Lublin becomes operational;
- Mid-May: Deportation of Jews from Beuthen and first exterminations at Auschwitz-Birkenau using provisional methods (Bunkers 1 and 2);
- June: New decision regarding the "Final Solution." All Jews must be exterminated within a short time span;
- Mid-August: A decision is made to build the four massive facilities for cremation and gassing at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

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