

# Genocide: was it the nazis' original plan?

Politics



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## Introduction

The current essay examined the question of when the Nazis decided on genocide with a specific focus on the extermination of European Jewry. While it is difficult to pinpoint a precise date for the commencement of the Final Solution, this essay suggests the policy was decided upon by high ranking Nazis in 1941 and, finally, legally codified in 1942 in the Wannsee Conference.

### The Confluence of Several Dangerous Ideas

No political idea simply becomes government policy overnight; rather, the process from one to the other occurs in complex ways. Indeed, the critic Christopher Browning, who penned an entire book titled *The Origins of the Final Solution* (2005), broadly concludes that there is no specific origin or beginning point, as such. As Browning puts it, “there is no clear and unambiguous dividing line between origins and implementation that would be valid for all regions of Europe under German occupation”. For this reason, trying to pinpoint the precise moment that the Nazis, so to speak, decided on genocide is problematic. For instance, if we wish to identify the senior level administrative policy decision on the Final Solution, we may reasonably cite the 20th of January 1942 as a key date: this was the date of the Wannsee Conference, whereat the “policy agreement” for the “Final Solution of the European Jewish question” was formulated, thereby outlining “the procedural guidelines for the future exterminations for physically healthy Jews were laid down once and for all”. (The procedure in question was liquidation via hard labour.) Yet manifold instances and legal rulings prior to

this admittedly significant moment testify to a good deal of genocidal forethought long in advance of the Wannsee Conference.

One of the primary critical difficulties in unlocking the truth behind the Nazis' policy of genocide is the cloak of euphemism the Reich upheld to conceal the reality of their dreadful actions. "Final Solution" is itself a euphemism, as is (or, perhaps better to say, was) the term "concentration camp" (standing in for "extermination camp"). Because the Nazis employed a discourse of obscurity in their legislative pronouncements, it can be difficult to get to the truth of the matter. As it happens, the difference between what official Nazi language would suggest and what historical facts prove to be the case represents a vast semantic gulf. Although it is hard as a contemporary reader to distance oneself from the connotations of the term "concentration camp", one should bear in mind the extremely different implications this term evokes as compared to "extermination camp". Such semantic dissonance is rife in Nazi legislature and official Reich discourse. As a result, scholars note the "appearance of contradictions between policy and practice": an issue which can be explained with reference to "the euphemisms used" to "cloak" major implementations of liquidation programmes.

While 1942 may be described as the year in which the formal decision was taken and, in effect, made policy, there are good grounds to mark 1941 as the year in which an integral Party decision was taken: that set the course for the systematic extermination of European Jewry. As a consequence, the scholar Richard Breitman argues that this was the year in which the "fundamental decision to exterminate the Jews" was made; and that, in direct consequence of this decision, "the Final Solution was just a matter of time –

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and timing". The Final Solution was at this inception stage targeted very specifically at European Jews. This is to do firstly with geographical reasons. Germany as a European country bordering on a number of other European countries was more directly in contact with European Jews than those from other continents. While the Nazis' official hatred for the Jews was not in theory localised (indeed, Hitler despised the Jews as a race, as opposed to a religion on nationally heterogeneous people), in practice the European Jews felt the brunt of its brutality. This very likely had a lot to do with Hitler's bearing a specific resentment for German Jews (a distinction which the Fuhrer tried to negate), whom, for various and highly dubious reasons, he blamed for causing Germany to lose the First World War.

Interestingly, there is some debate as to how much Hitler actually knew about the Final Solution and all its grisly details. In this regard, an entry from Goebbels's diary recounts an episode from December of that year. Hitler had gathered all the highest ranking Nazi officials to his Berlin apartment for a special meeting, the Reichsleiter and Gauleiter. The journal runs: "Concerning the Jewish question, the Fuhrer is determined to make a clean sweep. He prophesied to the Jews that if they were once again to cause a world war, the result would be their own destruction"; Goebbels goes on to affirm that the latter ominous assertion was "no figure of speech". Indeed it was not; the policy was already underway. This commenced with the 1941 invasion of the USSR, whereupon was witnessed the "crystallisation of a general policy of killing". At the same time, large numbers of Jews from Eastern and central Europe were being shipped out to camps, with fatal intent.

## Conclusion

The aforementioned obliqueness of Reich discourse makes it impossible to say for sure how informed and involved Hitler was in the Holocaust; how and when the decision for genocide was made. But we may nonetheless posit an informed surmise. By the end of 1942, the evidence clearly indicates, Hitler knew exactly what was going on and was fixed on a course of action: genocide.

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