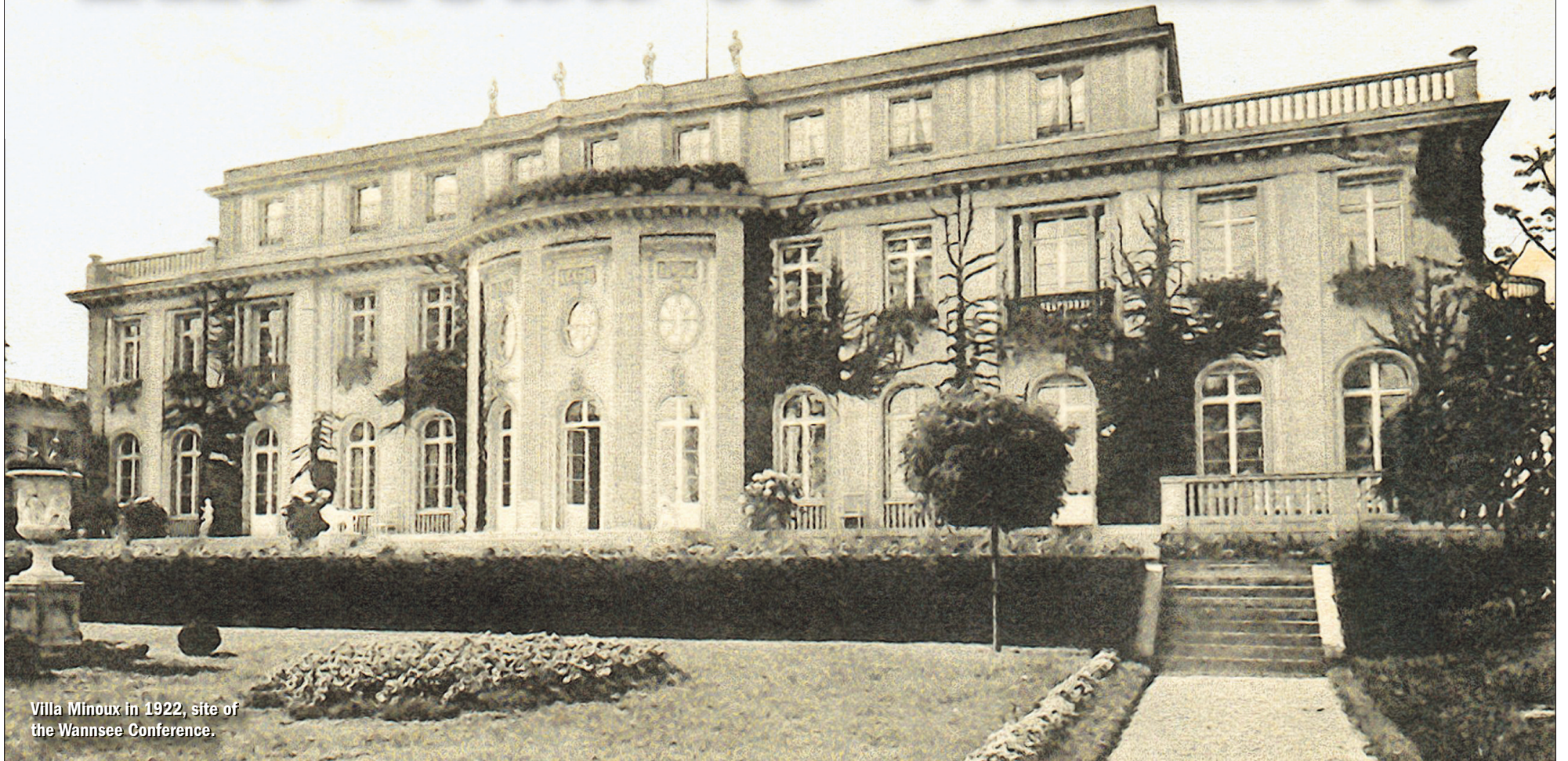


The road to Wannsee



Villa Minoux in 1922, site of the Wannsee Conference.

THE brutal, sadistic era of Nazi rule in Germany, though relatively brief – 12 years, in all, from 1933–1945 – left in its wake a number of dates that continue to live in infamy. January 20, on which the bizarre Wannsee Conference took place, in 1942, is one of these. Convened in a suburb of Berlin, the meeting drew together 14 of the leading bureaucrats of the regime at sub-ministerial level to discuss one – and only one – agenda item: “The final solution of the Jewish question.”

Two aspects of the Wannsee Conference make it remarkable:

First, the sheer scope of what was contemplated was frightening in its awesomeness. Beneath the bureaucratically euphemistic language, which the Nazis had refined to a great level of sophistication, was nothing less than the total annihilation of the Jewish population of Europe, in its entirety – on the Nazis’ own estimates, more than 11 million men, women and children. While the official protocol of the meeting, prepared by Adolf Eichmann, spoke in terms of solving “the Jewish question”, Eichmann testified, at his trial in Jerusalem in 1961, that not one person present at the meeting was under any illusion whatsoever about what was intended.

Secondly, and in stark contrast, the nature of the discussion, and the summary in the protocol, completely belied the enormity of what was being planned. Moreover, reconstructions of the event, based on the transcript that was contemporaneously made, as well as recollections of the principal participants, suggest a level of lightheartedness among those present that is chilling in the detachment it bespeaks.

What was involved was not any discussion of high policy, but rather the technicalities of moving huge numbers of civilian population to places “in the east”, where the “solution” to the “question” would be

On the 70th anniversary of the infamous Wannsee Conference that launched Hitler’s Final Solution, **Professor Harry Reicher** probes the question of how institutionalised genocide was accepted so readily by the Nazi hierarchy.

effected. Even the sum total of the Jews involved was presented to the meeting in bland accounting fashion, in the form of a balance sheet showing Jewish populations throughout Europe, on a country-by-country basis – much as an accountant would prepare a document showing the assets of a corporation. Eichmann himself – who was appointed to devise and oversee the implementation and logistics of transporting the Jews to their deaths – was jocularly referred to as the “shipping agent”. Indeed, at his trial, Eichmann’s defence was precisely that: he was merely in charge of transport – making the trains run on time, so to speak – and what happened to the “cargo” after it arrived was none of his business, much less his responsibility.

On top of everything else, the whole meeting, at which the overall plan of implementation was approved, took all of about 87 minutes!

TO go some way towards comprehending how something like the Wannsee Conference could have happened, it is helpful to bear in mind two factors:

First, from the time the Nazis ascended to power, in March 1933, they directed a massive propaganda campaign at the population. This proceeded on the assumption that Jews were racially inferior beings: that they were effectively vermin, being polluters of Aryan blood who had to be extirpated from society.

Very important to the propaganda campaign was the regulatory assault by the Nazis, aimed at the Jews, consisting of a torrent of some 2000 “laws” directed specifically and directly against them. These emanated from, and reflected, the underlying

racial ideology, and, at the same time, reinforced it, by systematically whitening away at the indicia of humanity, insofar as the Jews were concerned. Thus, Jews were subjected to the humiliation of being separately defined, thereby stamping them as different and inferior: their capacity to work, earn a livelihood and support themselves and their families was

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withdrawn, as one profession, business and trade after another was closed to them; their property was expropriated; over a period of time, they were excluded from avenues of education, resulting in what the diarist Victor Klemperer described as an “intellectual death sentence”; gradual segregation, as well as severe restrictions on movement, compounded the sense of inferiority, and generated a communal and individual claustrophobia of depressing proportions; and, on top of everything else, they were publicly branded objects of obloquy, and subject to all the other restrictions, indignities and humiliations, most infamously by laws requiring the wearing of the Star of David on their outer clothing.

Through the legislative scheme implementing these and other steps in the persecution of the Jews, the Nazis discriminated against, ostracised and, most importantly, dehumanised them. In doing so, they very effectively paved the way for the ultimate corollary thereof, as represented by the Wannsee Conference.

Co-extensively with the massive campaign aimed at reinforcing the

dehumanised image of Jews, the Nazi government promoted the perverted view of government which became known as “the Fuehrer principle”, under which all power – executive, legislative and judicial – was aggregated in very few hands, and ultimately in one pair of hands, namely those of Hitler himself. As such, it was the worst sort of antithesis of the notion of separation of

powers, to which we are accustomed in Western countries. An integral component of the Fuehrer principle was the deification of Hitler himself, who could, quite literally, do no wrong, and whose every word was, again quite literally, law. Thus, even the propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, himself an educated man who held a PhD, and who masterminded the propaganda campaign aimed at training the masses to think in the way the government wanted, could, in his own diaries, wax positively lyrical about Hitler, whose image he himself was moulding.

Wrote Goebbels: “The chief talk about race questions. It is impossible to reproduce what he said. It must be experienced. He is a genius. The natural, creative instrument of a fate determined by God. I am deeply moved. He is like a child: kind, good, merciful. Like a cat: cunning, clever, agile. Like a lion: roaring and great and gigantic.”

Gobbels concluded: “These days have signposted my road! A star shines leading me from deep misery! I am his to the end. My last doubts have disappeared. Germany will live! Heil Hitler!”

Thus, when Hitler ultimately

judged that the stage had been sufficiently set, and that the time was right to give the order for the Final Solution – which apparently happened in the late summer or autumn of 1941, and resulted in the convening of the Wannsee Conference – his judgment proved absolutely accurate. The reaction of Eichmann himself, upon learning of the order that the Fuehrer had given, is described in the memoirs of the man who led the prosecution against him in Jerusalem, the Israeli attorney-general Gideon Hausner:

“It was quite obvious to me that at the time Eichmann had fully identified himself with the new ‘radical method’, as he called it.

“Like other leading Nazis he considered the slaughter absolutely necessary. True, when Heydrich first informed him of the Fuehrer’s decision, it left him speechless for a while. Then he thought it over.

“The Fuehrer was right, of course, as usual. It was the right thing to do, he mused, in fact the only right thing. It involved, of course, new and onerous duties. Not very pleasant at times, but great things always require a sacrifice. He was proud to be right in the middle of it. He knew he was making history; it gave him a feeling of elation that future generations would regard him among the benefactors of mankind for having ‘freed the world of a pest.’”

WHEN we think of the anniversary of the day of infamy of the Wannsee Conference, the grim reality is that it was the end product of many other days of infamy. The dehumanisation of the Jews, together with the Nazis’ steadfast belief in the infallible Fuehrer, were the key paving stones on the road to Wannsee, and ultimately made the Final Solution possible.

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