

THE WANNSEE CONFERENCE: A FASCINATING EXPERIMENT OF HISTORY INTO FILM:

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SUMMARY

Using film effectively: why short clips are best. In history, I have found that a judicious selection of video clips is superior to screening a whole film or video. I employ transparencies of original documents and weave in pedagogical commentary, creating a triangular mode of presentation that ensures student retention. To demonstrate this methodology in two different exercises in my course on World War II, I shall discuss effective use of clips from *Triumph of the Will* and the Wannsee Conference.

The Wannsee Conference, a 1985 German docudrama, is an excellent teaching tool. First, it demonstrates a basic fidelity to the January 20, 1942 event itself and second, it invites a textual analysis of the original minutes. Historians and students of the Holocaust are aware that there does not exist a single written order that initiated the genocide. Perhaps it is because of this absence that there has been a continuing fascination with the Wannsee Conference, a definitive moment in the Holocaust. Our interest is to show how the bland language which recorded the event failed to masquerade the genocidal intentions of the perpetrators.

In this presentation I shall discuss a pedagogy for teaching select clips from the docudrama *The Wannsee Conference* in college or university. Such clips are meant to elaborate upon the historical event and to show both the strengths and weaknesses of the medium. Classroom time constraints demand that the selection of video clips be judicious and to a specific point. The only written evidence for the meeting itself was in the form of a protocol, drafted and vetted by Nazi officials Adolf Eichmann, Reinhardt Heydrich and Heinrich Müller. German and English copies of the *Protocol* are circulated in class during the lecture. The students thus handle a facsimile of the single surviving copy of only thirty originals. Textual analysis is one of two pedagogical hooks on which to hang this lesson. The second is to explain how racial fanaticism was the ideology fuelling the ongoing war of conquest in the East. These introductory remarks place the docudrama *The Wannsee Conference* into context. From the *Protocol*, filmmaker Heinz

Schirk and writer Paul Mommertz constructed a real-time imaginary equivalent, to recreate the ambience of this historical turning point. At Wannsee, the bureaucratic machine of death began to operate and entered a realm that Raul Hilberg has called absolutely new in history.

According to the text of the *Protocol*, the oblique objective of the meeting was "for the purpose of clarifying fundamental questions."¹ Students are informed that the fuzziness of this statement was part of the general ambiguity of language that the Nazis used to record this meeting. The blandness of the stated policy change from *emigration* to *evacuation* hides a murderous intent.

Heydrich's goal was to establish his own authority and to set into motion the machinery that would coordinate the Final Solution, *Endlösung*, without regard to geographic borders. A policy of covertness and secrecy dictated that there be no articulation of the methods of killing, so as to make it look as though the deaths to follow occurred through natural attrition. The Conference, like the film, lasted ninety minutes, and for the viewer, the "real time" element heightens the sense that everything in the film actually occurred as it unfolds, although they only see some minutes of the film in video format. The "realtime" element allowed filmmakers to invent a dialogue that was true to the time and circumstances in order to round out the factual context. They used Adolf Eichmann's prison testimonies to this end.

In the original *Protocol*, Heydrich builds to a deadly climax as he refers cryptically to the end of the emigration programme and the deportation of 537,000 Jews.² The enforced accelerated emigration policy would henceforth

¹«...um Klarheit in grundsätzlichen Fragen zu schaffen.» See Mendelsohn, John, ed. *The Holocaust* v.11. «*The Wannsee Protocol*» New York: Garland, 1982. v.2. (hereafter Protocol)

²«Trotz dieser Schwierigkeiten wurden seit der Macht,bernahme bis zum Stichtag 31.10.1941 insgesamt rund 537.000 Juden zur Auswanderung gebracht.» Heydrich stated that their transport had been financed by Jewish organizations which had raised 9.5 million dollars to this end. Protocol, 5.

be prohibited, "for reasons of an emigration during wartime and consideration of the possibilities in the East."³ The new policy, which he said was awaiting the Führer's sanction, was evacuation to the East as a further "solution possibility," *Lösungsmöglichkeit*. The key word "evacuations," *Evakuierungsaktionen*, tries to assume neutral meaning, but the mask soon falls, revealing a deadly intent.

The film's language goes much further than the objective language of the *Protocol*.⁴ Schirk used creative artistic freedom to enlighten the uninformed, but in reading the transparency, students must be helped to interpret the *Protocol's* bland language, where there is neither mention of *Einsatzgruppen* nor of the permanent gassing facilities then being completed. Close examination of the text reveals the answer in the most brutal of Darwinian terms: survival of the fittest. There is no mention of killing other than an enigmatic reference to "provisional actions," [unnamed *Einsatzgruppen* in the occupied Russian territory] where "practical experience is already being collected which is of greatest importance in relation to the future final solution of the Jewish problem." The text states that the intention was to allocate Jews for labour to the East, where "able-bodied Jews would be taken in large labor columns to these districts for work on roads, separated by sex, in the course of which action a great part will undoubtedly be eliminated by natural causes."⁵

As much as the Nazis tried to disguise the Final Solution, there is no doubt what this means. As Eichmann told his Israeli interrogators during his trial, the meaning of "natural causes" was "perfectly normal dying." The key reference to the final elimination of the survivors is put in cold-blooded terms in the *Protocol*: "The possible final remnant will, as it must undoubtedly consist of the toughest, have to be treated accordingly, as it is the product of natural selection, and would, if liberated, act as a bud cell of a

Jewish reconstruction.⁶ Eichmann confirmed this terrible Darwinian logic to the Court, that "treated accordingly" was a typical Himmler phrase that rang of "natural selection," which itself meant "killed, killed undoubtedly." The Nazis used the metaphor of disease attached to man, the sick animal, to describe the Jews/Bolsheviks as bacilli, ulcers, and toxic poisons. Europe itself was thought to be a tubercular or cancerous patient. Rational Social Darwinism was the license that Himmler used to state blandly that the law of existence prescribes uninterrupted killing so that the better may live.⁷ German fiction or not, the so-called roadworking assignments were meant to kill off the Jews.⁸ While the *Protocol* contains many euphemisms, the students are informed that according to the trial testimony of Adolf Eichmann, there was much more frank language around the table where terms like extermination and liquidation were used,⁹ language that was omitted from the formal minutes.

The meeting then turned to defining what was meant by persons of mixed blood or *Mischlinge*. In this diabolical web of horrific regulation, based upon the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, one fact stood out: a Nazi fear that the Jewish blood would assert itself and overwhelm the German blood. This reveals an element in Nazi race policy that is rarely highlighted: a pathological fear that by mixing races the children of these unions "will racially reveal the admixture of Jewish blood more strongly than persons of mixed blood of the second degree." Genetically, the 'Master Race' saw itself in peril.

The video sequences place the viewers privy to the inner workings of what Michael Burleigh called the "barbarous utopia" of Nazi racial hygiene.¹⁰ The film tries to deal with this core issue by creating a sharpened sense of conflict that has the Nazi officials arguing whether German blood, when mixed with Jewish blood, would create a new super race that might become the nemesis of Germany.

³«[I]m Hinblick auf die Gefahren einer Auswanderung im Kriege und im Hinblick auf die Möglichkeiten des Ostens ist die Auswanderung von Juden verboten.» *Protocol*, 5.

⁴The *Protocol* states, «Anstelle der Auswanderung ist nunmehr als weitere Lösungsmöglichkeit nach entsprechender vorheriger Genehmigung durch den Führer die Evakuierung der Juden nach dem Osten getreten.» *Protocol*, 5. The film has Heydrich use sweeping gestures across the map, followed by an indifferent sounding Eichmann describing roundups, ghettoization, concentration camps and finally «direct action.»

⁵«In grossen Arbeitskolonnen, unter Trennung der Geschlechter werden die arbeitsfähigen Juden strassenbauend in diese Gebiete geführt, wobei zweifellos ein Grossteil durch natürliche Verminderung ausfallen wird.» *Protocol*, 7.

⁶«Der allfällig endlich verbleibende Restbestand wird, da es sich bei diesem zweifellos um den widerstandsfähigsten Teil handelt, entsprechend behandelt werden müssen, da dieser, eine natürliche Auslese darstellend, bei Freilassung als Keimzelle eines neuen jüdischen Aufbaues anzusprechen ist.» *Protocol*, 8.

⁷Kaplan, Harold. *Conscience and Memory: Meditations in a Museum of the Holocaust*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. 63-64.

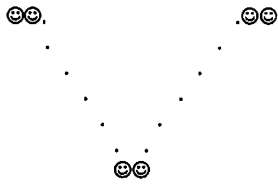
⁸«...wobei zweifellos ein Grossteil durch natürliche Verminderung ausfallen wird.» *Protocol*, 7.

⁹Yahil, Leni. *The Holocaust, The Fate of European Jewry, 1932-1935*. New York: Oxford, 1990. 312.

¹⁰Burleigh, Michael. *The Racial State*. See also Robert Proctor, *Racial Hygiene*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988.

Race example #3

MIXED BLOOD 1ST DEGREE MIXED BLOOD 1ST DEGREE



MIXED BLOOD 2ND DEGREE

ALWAYS CONSIDERED JEW BECAUSE JEWISH CHARACTERISTICS DOMINATE

Race example #4

MIXED BLOOD 2ND DEGREE MIXED BLOOD 1ST DEGREE



(ALWAYS CONSIDERED JEW BECAUSE JEWISH CHARACTERISTICS DOMINATE)

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