



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the premiere of the film "The Conference"
on 18 January 2022
in Berlin**

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

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

Where does this sense of unease and mistrust come from? The film portrays the working-level meeting between high-ranking police and administrative officials of the National Socialist state that would later come to be known in German history as the "Wannsee Conference". It portrays how this discussion might have unfolded; because we do not know the exact words that were spoken, or the intonation of the participants' voices.

Heydrich had, at Göring's request, invited the participants to "a meeting, followed by a breakfast". Killings, elimination and destruction were discussed while cognac was being served – this is how Adolf Eichmann later described it during his interrogation in Jerusalem. In many parts, Matti Geschonneck's film is not only a verbatim, but possibly also the most precise, rendering of the minutes of the Wannsee Conference.

What we see and witness is a well-oiled administrative machine, its interministerial coordination, draft documents and procedures, all of which – with the exception of the content that is being discussed – is

fully congruent with what can still be found in Ministries and administrative agencies today.

It is, after all, these commonplace and familiar aspects that jump out at us, shock us and unsettle us. What Geschonneck succeeds at is shining a spotlight on how banal evil can be.

The Wannsee Conference is a historical snapshot, it depicts the administrative procedures behind the Holocaust. The legal historian and jurist Hans-Christian Jasch interprets it as a warning signal, one that is also directed at our modern societies and their division of labour. Their bureaucratic and political structures can only resist their misuse as long as there is a stable, democratic constitution that keeps an equally stable government from slipping over the edge into the ideological abyss.

The fault lines where this abyss opened up are evident above all in the language of the minutes of the Wannsee Conference. Language is equally a means of identifying with, and distancing oneself from, things. Through words, one can show that one embraces or rejects a concept. In the minutes of the Wannsee Conference something different, and possibly even more radical, occurs. Here, every single word decries its innate function. It is not meant to name or identify anything. It is meant to obfuscate facts and dilute responsibility, watering it down to homeopathic potencies.

This turns the discussion as it was recorded in the minutes into a strange, at times even grotesque, round of shadow-boxing. By taking the floor, each speaker wants to raise his profile. He wants to assert and further both his own and his authority's value and importance for the National Socialist state, by presenting his own ideas and concepts – while at the very same time distancing himself from what he is talking about and is complicit in.

The participants in the Wannsee Conference knew as well as we do today what they did not want to say straight out at the time: namely, that the subject they were discussing was the "complete elimination of the Jewish populations of Europe", as Joseph Goebbels noted in his diary at the time after reading the minutes – the murder of eleven million people, which had been planned down to the very last detail; they had already begun pursuing this project some time ago, so that by the time the Wannsee Conference was held – especially after the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union had begun in June 1941 – hundreds of thousands of people had already been killed in pursuit of this aim.

Those who consider a modern state and its administration, including its checks and balances, to be a hallmark of the progress of civilisation will note that the fifteen pages of minutes of the meeting are proof, in carefully couched language, of a state that has fallen back into barbarism.

It shows how language itself can become an accessory to murder. It serves equally to draw attention away from and obfuscate the actual project, in order to make the genocide, as Hans-Christian Jasch writes, "communicable in administrative terms" and thus "manageable for the administrative apparatus". It enabled the many unnamed persons – whether they be administrative officials, staff members of the Reich Chancellery or the Foreign Office, policemen or train drivers – to be involved in the deportation and murder of millions of Jews, and, at the same time, it eased their conscience. However, it also made millions of Germans silent accomplices.

The minutes of the Wannsee Conference are a murder weapon. The gunshot residue they left behind is detectable to this very day.

What Matti Geschonneck lets his protagonists be is not caricatures of the Nazi henchmen we know from many other films depicting this period, but what they were before 1939 and what at least two of them remained after 1945: jurists and administrative officials.

Gerhard Klopfer, for example, was Head of Division III in the office of Hitler's deputy; as such, he was certainly one of the most influential civil servants in Nazi Germany, at the nexus between the party and the state. During the Wilhelmstraße Trial, he maintained that, at the Wannsee Conference, participants discussed only the "emigration of the Jews". When the prosecutor responded that "it does, however, appear that at the time you were told precisely what was to be done to the Jews," he responded: "I know nothing about that."

"I knew nothing about that" – how often was this response given after 1945.

Taking a closer look at the kind of people the fifteen men were who took part in the Wannsee Conference, the current conclusion of researchers is that these were men who had excelled in their public service careers; they were a representative selection of the administrative elite. Ten were academics. Nine of the fifteen were trained jurists or held degrees in political science. Eight had earned a doctorate.

They saw no discrepancy between their professional activity as jurists and the National Socialist race theory – because the Nazi legal system and ideology was simply not founded on equality of all before the law and the protection of the individual. "Justice is what benefits the nation": this maxim aimed to marginalise; it aimed to practice "selection based on race".

After 1945, the administrative elites often emerged from the denazification process they were required to undergo to maintain their careers without suffering any consequences, and they protected each other from criminal prosecution. This is a troubling chapter in Germany's legal and administrative history. And so, today, a few, very old enablers

of the Holocaust are facing trial, whereas many of their superiors were never called to account for the acts they committed during their lifetimes.

How could the Nazi murder machine function so perfectly? And what role does personal responsibility play in a dictatorship? This was one, and possibly the main, question to which Hannah Arendt devoted her life. She has shown how totalitarian systems do not merely forge a pact with absolute evil and are not driven only by demons and monsters, but that so many cogs are enmeshed with one another in these systems that individual responsibility becomes unrecognisable and there is no longer any awareness of injustice. The banality of evil is the soulless bureaucracy of a dictatorship, the rule of nobody, as Hannah Arendt writes.

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