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Review of *Conspiracy* (BBC/HBO Films), directed by Frank Pierson from a script by Loring Mandel

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about the origins of the “Final Solution.” Christian Gerlach, for example, has recently suggested that the prevailing interpretation of the conference as a discussion of logistical details actually underestimates the importance of the event. Gerlach argues instead that the conference must be understood as having been closely connected with Adolf Hitler’s decision to extend the genocide from Eastern European Jews to Jews throughout Europe, a decision that Gerlach dates to just a few weeks before the conference (see Christian Gerlach, *Krieg, Ernährung, Völkermord: Deutsche Vernichtungspolitik im Zweiten Weltkrieg* [1998], chapter 2).

One reason historians disagree over such issues is that the *Protokoll* itself is a deliberately vague summary of the conference rather than a precise transcript of the discussions. Eichmann drafted the document to privilege the interests of the SS, and specifically the RSHA, for which he worked; he referred to the mass murder of the Jews only euphemistically. For the purposes of making a film, then, the *Protokoll* provides a plot summary but not a script.

In translating the document into a film, therefore, the makers of *Conspiracy* took certain liberties. Cinematic license is most conspicuous when the film presents conversations that are mentioned neither in the *Protokoll* itself nor in related documentation. One tendency of these embellishments is to overstate the degree of disagreement and dissent at the conference, elevating what were most likely technical concerns into moral objections. For example, Friedrich Wilhelm Kritzinger, representative of the Reich Chancellery, is depicted as a bold dissenter, protesting to the meeting that Hitler had personally assured him that killing of Jews would not be the state’s policy. There is no documented instance, however, of Kritzinger actually having said this. It is likely that this fictitious comment was inserted into the script to reinforce the dramatic function assigned to Kritzinger in the film, namely that of moral dissenter, a role which he, in actuality, did not play at the conference.

Similarly, the film shows Heydrich working behind the scenes, pressuring and cajoling Kritzinger and Wilhelm Stuckart of the Interior Ministry, ultimately securing the assent of both men to his point of view. We do not know whether these private conversations really occurred. Heydrich is also depicted asserting to his listeners that the labor mobilization of Jews would merely serve as a cover for their liquidation. But both the *Protokoll* and the reality of Nazi measures at the time suggest a more complicated relationship between forced labor and extermination.

Conspiracy will naturally be compared to the German film *Die Wannseekonferenz* (dir. Heinz Schirk; 1984), a similarly conceived docudrama based on the *Protokoll*. The earlier German film conforms to the text of the *Protokoll* more closely, but this does not necessarily mean that it is more historically accurate. For example, *Conspiracy*’s most dramatic deviation from the *Protokoll* is its presentation of a discussion of

CONSPIRACY. Produced by Nick Gillott; directed by Frank Pierson; screenplay by Loring Mandel. 2001; color; running time 96 minutes. Distributed by Home Box Office (HBO).

Conspiracy is a docudrama about the infamous Wannsee Conference of January 20, 1942, at which Nazi officials discussed implementation of the “Final Solution.” Chaired by Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA), the meeting brought together a dozen representatives from state and party agencies involved in the genocide of Europe’s Jews. The notoriety of the meeting stems in large part from the fact that a summary of the proceedings—the so-called Wannsee *Protokoll* authored by Adolf Eichmann, who was also present—survived the war. Historians have used the document to implicate a broad spectrum of German bureaucracies in the mass murder, to demonstrate the leading role played by the SS, and to underscore the cold premeditation with which the killing was conceived and planned.

The significance of the meeting, however, remains a matter of some disagreement among scholars of Nazi Germany who have been involved in a broader debate

the murder process, including the nascent technology for mass gassing and cremation. This addition, however, is justified. In his interrogation by the Israelis in 1960, Eichmann admitted that such a discussion had indeed taken place, but he had deleted it from the official summary.

Jointly underwritten by HBO and BBC, *Conspiracy* features high production values and well-known actors. Kenneth Branagh dominates the film with his characterization of Heydrich. Branagh evokes the cultured yet swashbuckling image that Heydrich cultivated, so much so that I wonder whether the film makes Heydrich into a more compelling figure than he actually was. Moreover, Branagh comes off as seeming a good deal older than Heydrich, who was thirty-seven years old when he presided at Wannsee. Stanley Tucci's interpretation of Adolf Eichmann as a proactive anti-Semite represents a refreshing departure from the old, and inaccurate, cliché of the "banal" bureaucrat.

"This film," we are informed in the closing credits, "is based on a true story, with some scenes, events, and characters created or changed for dramatic purposes." Although academic specialists will doubtlessly be perturbed by inaccuracies and interpolations, *Conspiracy*, to its credit, does not stray very far from what is factually plausible. The main danger with this kind of film is that most viewers will not be able to tell the difference between plausible speculation and documented fact.

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