HE 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 awesomeTrinity. 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’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!

T o 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 whitewashing 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 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—and 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, was positively lyrical about Hitler, whose image he himself was moulding.

W hen we think of the anniversary of the day of infamy in 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.