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# Food and Genocide: Nazi Agrarian Politics in the Occupied Territories of the Soviet Union

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## Abstract

*This article explores the connection between food politics and genocide in the occupied eastern territories. The examination focuses on Herbert Backe, the 'second man' in the agricultural administration during the period of Nazi rule. Backe was in charge of food rationing during the war, and was involved in the planning of the economic exploitation of the Soviet Union after the invasion. Under Backe's directive, food policy turned into 'starvation policy' for people in the occupied lands of the Soviet Union. The author uses a range of archival sources, including rarely used personal letters and diaries of Backe and his wife, to understand Backe's role and motivations.*

During the twelve years of Nazi rule, agrarian and food policy took high priority. The Nazi leaders knew that without enough food at home, support for the war would dwindle. The repeatedly cited stab-in-the-back legend maintained that economic hardships at home after 1916 had driven Jews and communists to turn against Germany from within. Following the rationale of the Nazis, this had ultimately caused the defeat of Germany and its allies in the war. The lesson taken from the First World War was that any means of avoiding hunger on the home front were acceptable. Even before food shortages threatened Germany, however, food policy and agricultural considerations had been at the heart of the Nazis' expansionist and annihilationist dream of a 'Greater German Reich'. For Nazi planners, the goal of becoming less dependent on food imports was contingent on expanding Germany's borders to create a larger 'domestic' pool of natural resources. War was the only way to implement this vision. Land would be acquired in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union that would provide Germany with bountiful raw materials and rich

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agricultural land. Lastly, food policy was connected to the Nazis' racial ideology. The idea of more *Lebensraum* (living space) for Germany in the east included the concentration, deportation and murder of Slavs and Jews, whom the Nazis deemed racially inferior. Following this logic, they considered these people 'useless eaters' who, once defeated, could be 'dealt with' by lowering their food rations. The Nazis calculated without regret that massive starvation was going to come to eastern Europe and Russia.<sup>1</sup>

Nazi agricultural and food politics were dominated by two men, Richard Walther Darré and Herbert Backe. The Reich minister of food and agriculture, Darré is much better known than his colleague Backe, who took over Darré's positions in the agricultural administration in 1942 and officially replaced him as minister in April 1944. Darré had brought Backe into the administration in June 1933, but Backe's expertise and personality soon made him the most important player in food politics. Even before he became minister, Backe had de facto more power than his boss. As the head of the food commission in the Four-Year Plan administration, Backe worked closely with Hermann Göring and often reported directly to Adolf Hitler. He managed the food rationing system in the Reich, and set food rations in occupied territories in eastern Europe and for Soviet prisoners of war (POWs). By the time food policy took its most deadly turn – 2 million Soviet POWs died within a year of the attack on the Soviet Union – Backe was in charge of food distribution.

In recent scholarship historians have pointed out the connection between agrarian politics, extermination policies and the Holocaust.<sup>2</sup> Food emergencies at home and the intention of supporting the German army with food products from the conquered lands expedited and radicalised the Nazis' extermination policy in 1941 and 1942. In the eyes of the Nazi agricultural experts, exploiting agricultural production in western parts of the Soviet Union would solve the food crisis in Europe and speed up the extermination of undesirable people. In other words, food shortages and agricultural considerations were instrumental for the attack on the Soviet Union and for the implementation of the Final Solution.<sup>3</sup>

In the months leading up to 'Operation Barbarossa', the economic experts in the Office of the Four-Year Plan were charged with preparing the economic exploitation of future occupied territories in the east.<sup>4</sup> Their calculations included that, in order to

<sup>1</sup> See also Rolf-Dieter Müller, 'Die Konsequenzen der "Volksgemeinschaft": Ernährung, Ausbeutung und Vernichtung', in Wolfgang Michalka, ed., *Der Zweite Weltkrieg. Analysen-Grundzüge-Forschungsbilanz* (Weyarn: Seehamer Verlag, 1989, 1997), 240–9, 244.

<sup>2</sup> Götz Aly and Susanne Heim, *Vordenker der Vernichtung. Auschwitz und die deutschen Pläne für eine neue europäische Ordnung*, 2nd edn (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1993); Christian Gerlach, *Krieg, Ernährung, Völkermord. Deutsche Vernichtungspolitik im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Zürich: Pendo Verlag, 2001); and Gustavo Corni and Horst Gies, *Brot – Butter – Kanonen. Die Ernährungswirtschaft in Deutschland unter der Diktatur Hitlers* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> The argument was first made by Aly and Heim, *Vordenker der Vernichtung*, 383–84, and more recently by Gerlach, *Krieg, Ernährung, Völkermord*, 154–6, 203.

<sup>4</sup> On the economic and political planning for Barbarossa in the year prior to the invasion see most recently Alex J. Kay, *Exploitation, Resettlement, Mass Murder: Political and Economic Planning for German Occupation Policy in the Soviet Union, 1940–1941* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006).

feed the invading army and to extract agricultural resources for Germany, large areas of the Soviet Union would be subjected to famine and millions of Soviet citizens would starve to death. As the state secretary and head of the food administration in Göring's Four-Year Plan administration, Backe has been named as the architect of this murderous food policy.<sup>5</sup> He has been characterised as the calculating technocrat and ideologically motivated Nazi who outmanoeuvred his boss, Reich minister Darré, and put himself solely in charge of food policy.<sup>6</sup>

Even though his role has been acknowledged in newer studies, the ideas and personality of Backe have remained obscure. Biographical sketches paint the picture of an ideologically motivated bureaucrat, but few historians have read the complete personal papers and numerous documents that allow insight into the mind of the high-ranking Nazi.<sup>7</sup> Anna Bramwell's often cited biography of Darré describes the personalities of Darré and Backe in greatest detail, but it is flawed by her conclusions that reveal right-wing sympathies.<sup>8</sup> This article sheds light on Herbert Backe's role, ideas and motivation. It examines the radicalisation of the food policy by first analysing Backe and Darré's relationship. We shall see that their relationship is a superb example of the polycentric character of the Nazi regime where responsibilities overlapped and were frequently fought over.<sup>9</sup> Direct access to Hitler and ad hoc power were more important than titles and formal job descriptions. The main focus of the study is Backe, under whose directive food policy turned into 'starvation policy' (*Hungerpolitik*) for people in the occupied lands of the Soviet Union. His expertise in Russian agriculture, and his ambitious personality and dedication to his job helped him advance quickly to positions of power within the Nazi party, and he soon overtook his former boss Darré.

The analysis will utilise a range of archival sources including rarely used diaries and letters from Backe and his wife, Ursula.<sup>10</sup> These personal documents provide valuable

<sup>5</sup> Aly and Heim, *Vordenker der Vernichtung*, 369–76; Corni and Gies, *Brot – Butter – Kanonen*, 535.

<sup>6</sup> According to his own account, Darré simply wanted to save and protect the German peasantry, while Backe planned on starving millions of people in the eastern occupied territories literally to prepare the soil for German settlers. Anna Bramwell, *Blood and Soil: Richard Walther Darré and Hitler's 'Green Party'* (Abbotsbrook: Kensal Press, 1985), 1–12. Newer studies have dismissed the apologetic accounts of Darré. See, e.g., Gesine Gerhard, 'Richard Walther Darré – Naturschützer oder "Rassenzüchter"?', in Joachim Radkau and Frank Uekötter, eds., *Naturschutz und Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2003), 257–71.

<sup>7</sup> Bertold Alleweldt, 'Herbert Backe – Eine politische Biographie', Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, 2000; Joachim Lehmann, 'Herbert Backe – Technokrat und Agrarideologe', in Ronald Smelzer, Enrico Syring and Rainer Zitelmann, eds., *Die Braune Elite II. 21 weitere biographische Skizzen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1993), 1–12; Joachim Lehmann, 'Faschistische Agrarpolitik im Zweiten Weltkrieg. Zur Konzeption von Herbert Backe', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 10 (1980), 948–56; Susanne Heim, *Kalorien, Kautschuk, Karrieren. Pflanzenzüchtung und Landwirtschaftliche Forschung in Kaiser-Wilhelm-Instituten 1933–1945* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003), 28–33; and Bramwell, *Blood and Soil*, 93–100.

<sup>8</sup> Bramwell, *Blood and Soil*.

<sup>9</sup> On the polycratic character of the Nazi regime see, for example, Hans Mommsen, 'Hitlers Stellung im nationalsozialistischen Herrschaftssystem', in Gerhard Hirschfeld and Lothar Kettenacker, eds., *Der 'Führerstaat': Mythos und Realität* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), 43–72.

<sup>10</sup> Backe's personal papers are in the Federal Archives in Koblenz, BAK N 1075. The collection also contains the six volumes of diaries of his wife Ursula, who kept a detailed record of her husband's

information about Backe's own motivations and concerns. Backe wrote long, detailed letters to his wife, not only because he was away from his family for extended periods, but also because he wanted to 'keep a record of some things that have happened' and 'to reflect on some of the problems'.<sup>11</sup> Frau Backe's diary entries seem to follow the same lines: she believed that things of great magnitude were happening around her and she wanted to record them for future generations. Her notes, for example, of meetings between her husband and Hitler or Darré often contain direct quotes and precise records of the date and time of events.<sup>12</sup> She rarely wrote about personal matters, nor did she write much about her own feelings. For example, the births of her four children are described only in passing. Instead, Ursula tried to keep a record of her husband's political affairs and challenges. The examination of these hitherto unused documents will shed new light on Backe's ideological motivations and the question of authorship of the 'starvation plan'.

### **Backe's rise to power**

As the man in charge of food politics during the war, Backe liked to point to his intimate knowledge of the Russian people. His expertise in Russia had a personal dimension. Born in 1896 as one of five children of German émigrés to the Caucasus, he had spent the first two decades of his life in Russia. Until the outbreak of the First World War, Backe went to a Russian school in Tiflis. As a German citizen he was arrested in 1914 and interned in a village in the Ural mountains. After four years of internment he fled from the village and made it across the country to St Petersburg. With the help of the Swedish consul, Backe left for Germany, where his family had resettled.<sup>13</sup>

In the light of his childhood experience of Russia, his disregard for Russian lives later, as the food planner during the Second World War, is astonishing. Despite the personal and economic hardships of his family after the 1905 Revolution, his family had adjusted well to life in Russia and lived comfortably.<sup>14</sup> Being treated as an enemy of the Russian people, his internment during the First World War and the turmoil of the Bolshevik Revolution, however, must subsequently have influenced his view of the country.

political and personal life in 1931–48 (BAK N 1075, no. 17–22). The diaries have not been read by many historians, since access is restricted. I am very grateful to the Backe family for allowing me to read their late mother's diaries, especially Albrecht Backe, who arranged for me to meet his siblings, Armgard Henning (née Backe) and Arndt Backe, and has answered many questions regarding the diaries' content. These conversations, the numerous personal letters and the diaries form an important basis for this essay. I would also like to thank archivist Gregor Pickro for his continuing assistance with the collections, and Gerda Story, who transcribed Ursula Backe's diaries for me.

<sup>11</sup> Herbert in a letter to Ursula, 8 April 1945, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, diary entries, 3 Nov. 1934 or 30 May 1941, BAK N 1075, no 20.

<sup>13</sup> Alleweldt, 'Herbert Backe', 10–12.

<sup>14</sup> 'Aufzeichnungen von Hortense Backe, datiert Dezember 1968'. Notes written by Herbert Backe's sister Hortense, in Dec. 1968. I would like to thank the Backe family for giving me a copy of the document from their private collection.

In his 'political testament', written in the Nuremberg prison in 1946, Backe described the first years in Germany as a time of financial hardship for his family.<sup>15</sup> While finishing his education Herbert worked at several labouring jobs to support his ailing mother, his brother and three sisters (his father had committed suicide in 1907).<sup>16</sup> Like other political figures of his generation, Backe noted that his experience of war, defeat and economic collapse had shaped his political ideas.<sup>17</sup> He compared his own harsh experiences during his Russian internment with the hardships faced by the German people, and was disappointed that Germans 'were not able to see great ideas but were concerned only about their own daily bread'.<sup>18</sup>

In 1920 Backe enrolled at Göttingen University to study agriculture. It was in Göttingen where he first became involved with the young Nazi movement, joining the Stormtroopers (SA) in 1922 and the Nazi party in 1925.<sup>19</sup> He found his own ideas of a 'folk community', of a 'healthy' corporate society, reflected in National Socialism. He embraced, too, social Darwinist ideas of racial selection. He detested communism and liberalism and envisioned a new economic system as the only way out of the crisis.<sup>20</sup> Backe's academic career continued with a position as a research assistant at the Hannover Technical University in 1924. He wrote a dissertation on the Russian grain market, in which he argued that the backwardness of the Russian economy was due to the character and 'genetic disposition' of the Russian people.<sup>21</sup> The thesis was not accepted by the university because – according to Backe's introduction in a revised 1941 edition – the topic was 'too broadly conceptualised' and the microeconomic aspects were not considered thoroughly enough.<sup>22</sup> It is difficult to determine the true reasons for the rejection, but the radicalism of his political views might also have influenced the decision. Backe left academia and in September 1928, he and his soon-to-be wife Ursula leased the run-down state farm of Hornsen near Hannover.<sup>23</sup> Herbert and Ursula Backe proved to be capable farm managers who restored the farm and made it profitable despite the difficult years and worldwide agricultural crisis of the late 1920s.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Herbert Backe, 'Grosser Bericht', BAK N 1075, no. 3, 1. A copy of the manuscript is also available in the archives of the Institut für Zeitgeschichte (IfZ), Munich, Ms 577, fos. 1–58.

<sup>16</sup> See Backe's 'Lebenslauf', hand-written in June 1926, BAK N 1075, No. 1.

<sup>17</sup> This self-interpretation in the context of the larger historical perspective is characteristic of many Nazi leaders who grew up during the First World War. See Ulrich Herbert, *Best. Biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft, 1903–1989* (Bonn: Dietz, 1996), 42–50.

<sup>18</sup> Backe, *Grosser Bericht*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Alleweldt, 'Herbert Backe', 12.

<sup>20</sup> For his critique of liberalism, see Herbert Backe, *Um die Nahrungsfreiheit Europas. Weltwirtschaft oder Großraum*, 2nd edn (Leipzig: Wilhelm Goldmann Verlag, 1943) and Herbert Backe, *Volk und Wirtschaft im national-sozialistischen Deutschland. Reden des Staatssekretärs im Reichs- und Preussischen Ministerium für Ernährung und Landwirtschaft* (Berlin: Reichsnährstandsverlag, no date).

<sup>21</sup> Herbert Backe, 'Die russische Getreidewirtschaft als Grundlage der Land- und Volkswirtschaft Rußlands', 1941.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> See Backe, *Grosser Bericht*, 6, and Alleweldt, 'Herbert Backe', 10–17.

<sup>24</sup> The papers and account books of the Hornsen state farm are in the archives in Hannover (Niedersächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Hannover, NSHA) Dep. 124 Acc. 36/84. The Backe family's lease lasted until 1946; it was renewed until 1949. When the Backes moved to Berlin because of

Backe's membership of the Nazi party lay dormant until the agricultural crisis renewed his involvement in local politics. In 1931 Backe ran on the Nazi party ticket and became chair of the local peasant organisation. According to his own account, written in the Nuremberg prison after the war, Backe was deeply impressed by the Nazi movement and especially by Hitler. He admired Hitler's ability to 'reduce complicated political, cultural and economic developments to short "primitive" formulas and characterisations that were so much clearer than his enemies' twisted explanations'.<sup>25</sup> In a letter to his wife dated 21 March 1933, Backe described how he saw Hitler's gaze on him and knew that 'this man would force me to fight until the end'.<sup>26</sup> His admiration and loyalty to Hitler, he knew already in 1933, would never end. In April 1941 he told his wife that he believed that nobody else understood and supported the Führer with his depth of conviction.<sup>27</sup> In his political testament, Backe described 'my own path to Hitler' in great detail to exemplify how 'millions of others . . . had to go the same way'.<sup>28</sup>

It was during this time that Backe met his future colleague, boss and ultimately political rival, Darré. Darré had become the agricultural expert for the Nazi party in 1931. Backe's expertise in agricultural questions impressed Darré and he encouraged him to get more involved in party politics. Backe was elected to the Prussian parliament in April 1932, but his sojourn in Berlin only confirmed his lack of respect for parliamentary politics. In his eyes 'nothing got done', and all he saw was the 'hollowness of German parliamentarianism'.<sup>29</sup> In early 1933 Backe was charged with reporting to Hitler personally about the agricultural situation; this was the beginning of Hitler's respect for Backe's competence in complex food questions that would ultimately put him in charge of food policies in Germany and German-occupied territories.

In these early years of their relationship, Backe admired Darré's talent and envisioned a great political career for his mentor.<sup>30</sup> In letters to his wife he described Darré as 'fabulous' and 'very successful'.<sup>31</sup> He had deep respect for his boss and imagined him as the future foreign minister.<sup>32</sup> The two men also got along personally. Darré even became godfather to Backe's second child, Albrecht, born in August 1933.<sup>33</sup>

After Darré was named Reich minister in Hitler's government, he appointed Backe as state secretary (*Staatssekretär*) in October 1933. In these first years the two men worked closely together and made some major changes in agrarian policy.

Herbert's work a cousin oversaw the domain. The four Backe children spent the summers as well as the last year of the war on the farm. Conversation with Backe's children, 2 June 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Backe, *Grosser Bericht*, 7. He first heard Hitler speak at a Nazi rally in Braunschweig in 1931.

<sup>26</sup> Letter to Ursula Backe, 21 March 1933, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Letter to Ursula, 8 April 1941, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Backe, *Grosser Bericht*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>30</sup> See Herbert's letter to Ursula, 6 Sept. 1933, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Letters to Ursula, 3 May 1932 (probably 1933), and 4 May 1933, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Letters to Ursula, 9 June 1933, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

<sup>33</sup> One of Albrecht's middle names is accordingly 'Walther'. Conversation with Backe's children, 2 June 2004, and Albrecht Backe's letter, 2 Sept. 2004. Ursula Backe cherished the friendship between the two families. See Ursula's diary entries, 27 June 1933, 5 May 1934, 4 Feb. 1935 and 18 Dec. 1934, BAK N 1075, no. 18.

They introduced legislation to regulate the market, limit imports and control prices. They founded the Reich Food Estate (*Reichsnährstand* or RNS) that oversaw the entire food sector.<sup>34</sup> Backe and Darré also wrote a new Reich Inheritance Law (*Reichserbhofgesetz* or REG) that was intended to protect family farms from what they saw as the splintering of these holdings.<sup>35</sup> The changes were pushed through against considerable resistance.<sup>36</sup> In a letter to his wife Backe boasted that ‘our law [the REG] will one day be remembered as the beginning of a new era’.<sup>37</sup> Darré acknowledged Backe’s hard work and was very pleased with his protégé.<sup>38</sup> At this point in their relationship, Backe recognised some flaws in Darré’s understanding of economic matters, but he still admired Darré’s skills as a politician.<sup>39</sup> He described Darré as ‘a great peasant leader; he is the only one who instinctively recognised the idea of the peasantry and held on to it’.<sup>40</sup>

Over the next two years, however, Backe started to have some doubts about Darré’s leadership abilities. He questioned Darré’s judgement of people and the way he handled conflict within his department. In a letter to his wife dated 5 July 1935, Backe called Darré a ‘loser’ (*Versager*) because he did not have the courage to go to Hitler to talk about problems in his department. Backe described Darré as weak and insecure,<sup>41</sup> and lamented again that economic questions were clearly not Darré’s strong suit.<sup>42</sup> In 1935 and even 1937, Backe was not as confident that Darré was the man who could fight the fight. He even confided to his wife that he was sure Darré would ‘fail’.<sup>43</sup> Darré, on the other hand, admired Backe’s expertise in economic questions, but saw problems in his personality. Darré attributed to Backe a ‘Russian weakness in making decisions, linked with vanity and an ambitious wife’. In Darré’s view, Backe also lacked the right touch for political questions.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Gustavo Corni, *Hitler and the Peasants: Agrarian Policy of the Third Reich, 1930–1939* (New York: Berg, 1990), 66–115.

<sup>35</sup> On the REG see Friedrich Grundmann, *Agrarpolitik im 3. Reich. Anspruch und Wirklichkeit des Reichserbhofgesetzes* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1979).

<sup>36</sup> See Gesine Gerhard, ‘Breeding Pigs and People for the Third Reich: Richard Walther Darré’s Agrarian Ideology’, in Franz-Josef Brueggemeier, Mark Cioc and Thomas Zeller, eds., *How Green Were the Nazis? Nature, Environment, and Nation in the Third Reich* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 129–46, 135, and Corni, *Hitler and the Peasants*, 145–8.

<sup>37</sup> Letter to Ursula, 14 Oct. 1933, BAK N 1075, no. 1. See also Backe’s letter, 30 Sept. 1933, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

<sup>38</sup> See Darré’s letter to Backe, 27 Dec. 1934, BAK N 1075, no. 10. See also Darré’s personal dedication in BAK N 1075, no. 1, and Ursula Backe’s diary entry for 5 May 1934, BAK N 1075, no. 17.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, the diary entry for 15 Oct. 1934, BAK N 1075, no. 17. See also Backe’s letters to Ursula, 6 Sept. 1933, 16 June 1935 and 4 Sept. 1936, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Letter to Ursula, 6 Sept. 1933, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

<sup>41</sup> Letter to Ursula, 5 July 1935, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Letter to Ursula, 4 Sept. 1936, BAK N 1075, no. 1. See also Backe, *Grosser Bericht*, 21.

<sup>43</sup> Letter to Ursula, 5 July 1935, BAK N 1075, no. 1. See also the letter of 20 Aug. 1936, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

<sup>44</sup> Darré’s diary entry for 2 March 1936. Darré’s diaries were edited after the war and can only be used with great caution. A copy of the edited diaries is in the Stadtarchiv Goslar (SAG) N Darré, no. 484 and in BAK N 1094 I, no. 65a.

Backe's reservations should be interpreted as an expression of differences in working style and personality rather than a sign of political disagreement. Both shared the same ideas and general politics, but they believed in different ways of implementing them. Backe was clearly more determined, more ambitious and more willing to sacrifice his own health and his popularity with other people to win the 'historic battle'.<sup>45</sup> In numerous letters to his wife he grumbled about the narrow-mindedness of others who did not seem to see the bigger picture and had only their own personal advance in mind.<sup>46</sup> He described in detail his fears and frustrations, but he never questioned his ideas.<sup>47</sup> Rejection seemed to make Backe only more determined and combative. In April 1942 he acknowledged that he 'might not win. That depends on me. But my work will win. There is no doubt. And from the beginning I've understood my responsibility as a responsibility to the movement, to the Führer'.<sup>48</sup> Darré, on the other hand, was taken aback by strong criticism. He took disapproval personally and easily felt defeated. He suspected enemies everywhere and always felt misunderstood. This attitude was also evident in his recollections after the war, when he described himself as the outsider and a 'victim' of other Nazi officials.

The professional relationship between Backe and Darré became more complicated with Backe's appointment as food commissioner in the Four-Year Plan. The office of the Four-Year Plan (*Vierjahresplanbehörde*) was founded in October 1936 under Hermann Göring to prepare Germany for war. Eight state secretaries from different departments formed the General Council (*Generalrat*) led by Paul Körner. After 1939, the General Council's powers increased tremendously.<sup>49</sup> As the food expert on Göring's staff, Backe's responsibilities overlapped with and interfered in his tasks as state secretary in Darré's food ministry.<sup>50</sup> The first contentious issue between Backe and Darré was the staffing of offices. While Backe insisted on taking some men with him into the Four-Year Plan administration, Darré argued that he could not afford to lose any of his staff and accused his state secretary of insubordination.<sup>51</sup> Backe felt caught between two bosses and his loyalty to Darré made his job quite difficult.

Staffing and overlapping responsibilities remained contentious issues in the years to come. The critical tone grew increasingly harsher and Darré asked repeatedly for a clarification of the question of power.<sup>52</sup> In 1939, Darré worried that Backe, as the food commissioner in the Four-Year Plan, was able to make decisions without

<sup>45</sup> Ursula Backe's diary entry, 30 May 1941, BAK N 1075, no. 20.

<sup>46</sup> In a letter of 18 June 1935, Herbert writes, 'All these little people have no idea and don't see why and for what the Führer, Darré and other leaders are fighting. They have no idea that this is the biggest battle fought in millennia'. See also the letter of 18 Aug. 1943, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

<sup>47</sup> See for example his letters to Ursula, 21 Aug. 1942 and 6 April 1941, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Letter to Ursula, 8 April 1941, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

<sup>49</sup> See Kay, *Exploitation*, 16–18.

<sup>50</sup> Soon after his appointment, Göring assured Backe that as his *Generalrat* he was 'more than a Minister'. Ursula Backe's diary entry, 23 Oct. 1936, BAK N 1075, no. 19.

<sup>51</sup> Diary entries, 8 and 25 Nov. 1936, BAK N 1075, no. 19.

<sup>52</sup> On the administrative chaos and polycratic character of the Nazi regime see Dieter Rebenitsch, *Führerstaat und Verwaltung im Zweiten Weltkrieg: Verfassungsentwicklung und Verwaltungspolitik, 1939–1945*



Darré's consent or even without informing Darré.<sup>53</sup> He was reassured that his position was not affected by Backe's double appointment and that Göring would continue to 'discuss all matters of importance' with the Reich minister.<sup>54</sup> However, an incident in early 1941 showed that the chain of command no longer worked in that way. After a meeting with Backe and other state secretaries, Göring sent out a memo on 13 January 1941 that anticipated a reduction in meat rations by the summer. A note from Darré written on that same memo on 12 February 1941 states that he had not even been informed.<sup>55</sup> This is clearly another indicator that Hitler had lost faith in Darré's abilities by January 1941 and was working over his head – or behind his back – with Backe. Again, in autumn 1941 Darré asked for clarification of the decision-making process. He suggested freeing Backe from his double position and putting him solely in Darré's department. 'That way', Darré argued, 'we would have clearly defined responsibilities.'<sup>56</sup> This demand indicates Darré's misjudgement of his own position; by 1941 his standing had slipped considerably while Backe's clout had grown. In fact, Darré now had only pro forma power. He still led the Reich Food Estate, was the Reich Peasant Leader and held the post of minister of agriculture, but with the beginning of the war real power had shifted to Backe. Backe had the confidence of Göring and Hitler, to whom he reported on the food situation in Germany and in the occupied territories. Göring had put him in charge of food policy in preparation for Operation Barbarossa, and Backe acted without informing Darré.<sup>57</sup> Darré did not seem to understand the implications of this, and stubbornly insisted on Backe's subordination or at least the formal respect from Backe he deserved as minister.

Having bypassed his boss, Backe waited for the final *Bruderkampf* (literally a rivalry between two brothers that one will lose).<sup>58</sup> What had driven the two men apart were not their differing ideologies, but a clash of personalities and political rivalry. Backe told his wife about a conversation he had with Darré in which Darré lamented that he had lost the battle for the peasantry. Darré grumbled that his campaign for blood and soil for which he had 'sacrificed everything' had failed. At this point, Backe had no respect left for Darré, not even pity. He described Darré as 'finished, a broken man', who did not understand that 'not his mission, but he himself had failed'. He confessed to his wife that he did not even feel 'hatred, but only great contempt' for this man, who could not see his own inability but blamed others – especially Hitler – for his failures. He saw Darré's failure as 'the collapse of an egoistic man, who wanted

(Stuttgart: Steiner, 1989); Martin Broszat, *Der Staat Hitlers: Grundlegung und Entwicklung seiner inneren Verfassung* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1976) and Mommsen, *Hitlers Stellung*.

<sup>53</sup> Darré's letter, 9 Dec. 1939, BAK R 43 II, no. 356b, fol. 17.

<sup>54</sup> Letter, 11 Dec. 1939, BAK R 43 II, no. 356b. See also Darré's diary entry, 5 Feb. 1937, BAK N 1094 I, no. 65a.

<sup>55</sup> BA R 3601/371, fol. 10–11.

<sup>56</sup> Darré's letter, 25 Aug. 1941, BAK N 1094 II, no. 20.

<sup>57</sup> Darré's letter to Göring, 27 June 1941 in BAK N 1094 II, no. 20. See also Alleweldt, 'Herbert Backe', 53.

<sup>58</sup> Backe's letter to Ursula, 8 April 1941, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

by any means to promote himself.<sup>59</sup> Darré, according to Backe, deserved a fatal blow so that he himself could finish the job.

Darré, on the other hand, believed that he could still work with Backe.<sup>60</sup> In another attempt to build bridges, he wrote a cordial letter to Backe. He had given Backe the power to make decisions on all questions regarding the war while Darré was on vacation. ‘This,’ in Darré’s own words to Backe, ‘will show you more than any words that I personally and professionally trust you to represent me at this crucial time’.<sup>61</sup> Backe’s cynical comments in the margins of Darré’s letter (‘how dare he’, ‘that’s enough!’ and exclamation marks) reflect his deep antipathy towards Darré.<sup>62</sup>

The ‘Darré case’<sup>63</sup> remained a problem until Darré’s dismissal in May 1942.<sup>64</sup> But, even then, Hitler hesitated to replace Darré as minister because he was afraid that this would be understood as an acknowledgement of problems with Nazi food policy.<sup>65</sup> Darré was officially sent on leave for ‘health reasons’, while Backe acted as minister during his absence. The end of Darré’s political career occurred silently and without further public notice.

### **Backe in charge: food policy and war**

Even before Backe was officially charged with Darré’s duties, he made all the decisions in the realm of food policy. His expertise in Soviet agriculture and his skilful handling of food policy during the first two years of the war had gained him Hitler’s confidence, while Darré seemed unprepared for dealing with the stringencies of the war.<sup>66</sup> In order to win, immediate action was required in the food sector. The clear priority was securing food resources rather than saving peasant farms; the implementation of the blood-and-soil ideology could wait until after the war. Backe also seemed better prepared to deal with the economic aspects of the war in the east, knowing Russia from experience and having studied Soviet agriculture. In the 1941 introduction to his revised dissertation, Backe stated that the current situation demanded the annexation of Russia into the greater European economic area, and he promised that

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Darré’s diary entries, 5 Feb. 1940 and 17 Jan. 1941, BAK 1094 I, no. 65 a. Ursula Backe described in her diary entry for 17 Jan. 1941 a friendly meeting between Darré and Backe and noted that the conflict was over. BAK N 1075, no. 20.

<sup>61</sup> Darré’s letter to Backe, 14 March 1941, BAK N 1075, no. 10. See also Darré’s diary entry, 14 March 1941, SAG N Darré, no. 484.

<sup>62</sup> Darré’s letter to Backe, 14 March 1941, BAK N 1075, no. 10. We cannot be sure that these comments (in red marker) were made by Backe. However, given the fact that the letter was in a folder with other personal letters written by Herbert to Ursula, it is very likely that these are Herbert’s comments. See Herbert’s letter to Ursula, 8 April 1941, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

<sup>63</sup> Diary entries, 22 Sept. 1941 and 14 April 1942, BAK N 1075, no. 20.

<sup>64</sup> See memos, May 1942 in BAK R 43 II, no. 1143. See also Ursula’s diary entry, 13 May 1942, BAK N 1075, no. 20. See also diary entries, 11 April 1942 and 17 April 1942, BAK N 1075, no. 20. In May 1942 Backe asked Hitler directly to give him full responsibility. See diary entry, 10 May 1942, BAK N 1075, no. 20.

<sup>65</sup> See Goebbels’s diary entry, 21 May 1942.

<sup>66</sup> See Goebbels’s diary entry, 19 May 1942.

his knowledge would help in dealing with Russia's special circumstances.<sup>67</sup> In another publication on the European food market, Backe argued strongly against liberalism and promoted his idea of a European continental market. The agricultural resources of Russia and other parts of the USSR would be instrumental in attaining the goal of an independent Europe.<sup>68</sup>

Backe had proved himself to be a capable administrator during the first two years of the war. He had introduced a complex, hierarchical food rationing system on 27 August 1939 and had maintained German nutrition at a tight but acceptable level. Food production and distribution at home was ensured through a system of incentives, coercion and monitoring of the agricultural sector. Home production, however, was only providing part of the food supply. Trade agreements with allies and the ruthless exploitation of occupied and annexed countries brought grains and other essential food resources to Germany.<sup>69</sup> In any case, the secure food situation had avoided instability at home as had occurred during the First World War.<sup>70</sup>

Keeping the popular mood favourable was crucial, but it was not the only link between food and war. Securing the food supply and acquiring new resources had been instrumental to waging a war in the first place. From the beginning, Nazi ideology envisioned gaining access to additional agricultural land and reorganising a greater European market dominated by Germany. In its ultimate logic this necessitated a war in the east, since the goal of becoming independent of other food-exporting countries could not be achieved while Germany remained within its existing national borders.<sup>71</sup> Nazi agricultural policy was in no way equipped to increase food production at home. On the contrary, legislation introduced in the 1930s had curtailed investment in agriculture.<sup>72</sup> New territories had to be acquired if Germany wanted to reduce its dependence on food imports. Land and resources in Poland and especially the Ukraine – the 'bread basket of Europe' – meant that they were regarded as 'natural' places to exploit.<sup>73</sup> In other words, agricultural-economic

<sup>67</sup> Introduction to the 1941 publication of Backe's dissertation, *Die russische Getreidewirtschaft als Grundlage der Land- und Volkswirtschaft Rußlands*.

<sup>68</sup> Herbert Backe, *Um die Nahrungsfreiheit in Europa. Weltwirtschaft oder Grossraum*, 2nd edn (Leipzig: Wilhelm Goldmann Verlag, 1942).

<sup>69</sup> It is difficult to estimate the percentage of food imports from occupied and allied countries. Corni and Gies estimate that in 1938/9 9.8 per cent of all food supplies were imported to Germany. In 1942/3 the figure had risen to 14.8 per cent. In 1943/4 12.9 per cent of the overall food supply came from other countries. Corni and Gies, *Brot – Butter – Kanonen*, 554. Müller states that in 1933 Germany produced only 80 per cent of its food at home. Müller, 'Die Konsequenzen der "Volksgemeinschaft"', 242.

<sup>70</sup> On the rationing system during the war see Corni and Gies, *Brot – Butter – Kanonen*, 555–82. For other regulations regarding food distribution to prepare Germany for war, see *ibid.*, 413–16.

<sup>71</sup> Corni and Gies see agrarian goals and Nazi expansionist policy as inseparable; they do not agree, however, that the war was started for economic reasons. According to these authors, the food planners of the Nazi regime used the ideological war to exploit food resources in the Soviet Union. *Ibid.*, 500, 532.

<sup>72</sup> With the preparation for war priority was given to war industries, while resources to increase agricultural production were restricted further. See in detail *ibid.*, chs. 3 and 4.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 500, 33.

interests were at the forefront of the planning for the invasion of the Soviet Union.<sup>74</sup>

To prepare for this economic exploitation, Göring informed the top officials in the Four-Year Plan administration of the decision to invade the Soviet Union only a few days after Hitler had met the military leadership on 4 November 1940. Among them were the state secretaries Backe and Paul Körner.<sup>75</sup> At this time the food situation in Germany had become increasingly difficult because of the ongoing British blockade. Trade agreements with the Soviet Union brought large amounts of foodstuff to Germany, but unwillingness to depend on Stalin's mood and the need to extract even more food from the east called for a more radical approach. Backe had to come up with a substantial increase in agricultural imports in order to avoid drastic reductions of food rations – and the breakdown of the home front. In other words, the envisioned acquisition of food resources in eastern Europe and Russia expedited the decision to invade the Soviet Union. Hitler had already proclaimed in August 1939 that he needed 'the Ukraine, in order that no one is able to starve us again as in the last war'.<sup>76</sup> In the same vein Goebbels wrote in an article a year after the beginning of the Operation Barbarossa that the war against the Soviet Union was launched for 'grain and bread, for a full breakfast, lunch and dinner table'.<sup>77</sup> When the war on the eastern front turned out to be lasting much longer than expected, Hitler repeated that Backe's responsibility was to 'get a lot out of Russia in 1943'.<sup>78</sup>

The urgency of the food question also becomes apparent in the flurry of reports and meetings in the winter of 1940–1 between Hitler, Göring and those in charge of food, especially Backe and Körner. Backe had rewritten passages of his yearly report on the food situation in late December 1940 with the sole purpose of emphasising more clearly the precarious situation and the need for immediate action. In a meeting with Göring on 13 January 1941 Backe suggested the reduction of meat rations in the near future, a step that until then had been considered problematic for fear of jeopardising support at home.<sup>79</sup>

In the eyes of the economic planners in the office of the Four-Year Plan, the invasion of the Soviet Union and the acquisition of agricultural products would solve the problem of limited food resources at home. In order to overcome initial hesitations over how the war would actually affect agricultural production, a plan needed to be drawn up with instructions as to how exploitation would proceed, and over the ensuing months the state secretaries designed such a plan. The Soviet Union was divided into two zones with regard to food production – the so-called

<sup>74</sup> See Kay, *Exploitation*.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>76</sup> Hitler had said this to the High Commissioner of the League of Nations in Danzig. Here quoted from *ibid.*, 40.

<sup>77</sup> Here quoted from Corni and Gies, *Brot – Butter – Kanonen*, 451.

<sup>78</sup> The meeting between Hitler and Backe took place in late January 1942 and dealt with reductions in food rations. Darré did not agree with such a reduction, but was only told about it after the decision had been made. Ursula Backe's diary entry, 2 Feb. 1942, BAK N 1075, no. 20.

<sup>79</sup> See the exchange of letters and memos between Backe, Darré and Moritz in BA R 3601, fos. 7–28.

deficit zone (the forests of Belarus and northern and central Russia) and the surplus zone (the Ukraine, southern Russia and the Caucasus region). In order to extract a maximum of food, the deficit zone had to be sealed off and left to itself. According to the Russia expert Backe, the Soviet population had grown too fast and the industrial urban centres were unable to support themselves. Under German occupation, these areas would be left to their own fate, while agricultural produce could be extracted from the surplus zone to provide food for the Greater German Reich. Here lies the foundation for what historians have labelled Backe's *Hungerpolitik* or 'starvation policy'.

Secondary literature disagrees as to whether there was an actual plan authored by Backe that used starvation as a means to accomplish the Nazi goals in the east. Most authors conclude that Backe and the other economic planners had no qualms over the calculation that, as a result of the invasion and economic exploitation, millions of Soviet citizens would starve. This was regarded as the inevitable consequence of a war fought against their foremost enemy. However, whether the intention was to induce starvation as a means of getting rid of people considered racially inferior remains controversial.

At the centre of the controversy is Backe, the man whom Hitler and Göring entrusted with the details of the economic exploitation following the invasion. In a letter to his wife dated 8 April 1941, Herbert confirmed that the preparations for Barbarossa were in full swing. His mood was upbeat and he was confident about the economic benefits of the invasion. His letter emphasised the secrecy of the operation, and it reflected his personal pride that he was in charge.

I have thought about the measures for Barbarossa in regard to our area and have come to a decision. Yesterday I worked until 2 a.m. on the concept. I need Göring's permission for my plan as soon as possible. Then it will be a really big thing. In contrast to the unspeakable pressures of the last months I see everything more clearly now. The decisions are made, success is assured, in my view. I just need the general permission, since this is not only about agricultural issues, but about the economy as a whole.<sup>80</sup>

Hitler trusted Backe's expertise and followed his advice. Ursula Backe's diary entry of 30 May 1941 highlights the complete agreement between Backe, Hitler and Alfred Rosenberg (who would become Reich minister for the occupied eastern territories) regarding the envisioned exploitation.

On the 14th, telephone call. Herbert to meet the Führer on May 15th. He gives report in the presence of Lammers, Bormann, Keitel, without Göring or Darré. The Führer immediately asks questions about Barbarossa. Herbert reports, shows maps, reports about overall food situation. Some of it was news to the Führer. In general, Herbert's report just confirmed his already clear view of the situation. Also complete agreement between Rosbg. [Rosenberg] and Hbt. [Herbert] on the basics.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Letter from Herbert Backe to Ursula, 8 April 1941, BAK N 1975, no. 1.

<sup>81</sup> Ursula Backe's diary entry, 30 May 1941, BAK N 1075, no. 20.

In briefings on other issues regarding the occupied territories, Hitler is cited by Ursula Backe in her diary in July 1941: ‘What’s Backe’s opinion? What did Backe say? What does Backe say?’<sup>82</sup>

The details of the economic exploitation to follow the invasion were formulated in a series of meetings and guidelines. On 2 May 1941 the state secretaries from the different ministries came together in Berlin. This meeting of senior officials was comparable to the Wannsee conference in its horrendous outcome.<sup>83</sup> The state secretaries agreed that the German army would feed itself entirely from Soviet land. Soviet agricultural regions would provide food for Germany while Soviet urban and industrial centres would be cut off from supplies. Famine on a mass scale was ‘unavoidable’. In the bureaucratic language of the protocol, it was calculated that ‘without doubt tens of millions of people would starve to death’.<sup>84</sup> A protocol of the meeting has survived, but no list of the names of those who attended. Most historians are certain that Backe was present.<sup>85</sup> The conclusions from the meeting closely resembled Backe’s ideas. It would have been unimaginable that the man in charge of food who had the confidence of Hitler would have missed a meeting that formulated the guidelines for the economic exploitation of the Soviet Union.

On 23 May written guidelines were circulated that reiterated the conclusions from the earlier meeting.<sup>86</sup> The twenty-page document was authored by the agricultural section of the Economic Staff East (*Wirtschaftsstab Ost*) under the directive of Hans-Joachim Riecke. Germany would extract large amounts of agricultural produce from the ‘surplus territories’, while Soviet citizens in the ‘deficit areas’ would face terrible famine. Ultimately, the grain-producing areas of the Soviet Union would become part of the larger continental European market dominated by Germany. In case there were any questions left with regard to what would happen to the Soviet population in these territories, the document stated,

Many tens of millions of people in this territory will become superfluous and will die or must emigrate to Siberia. Attempts to rescue the population there from death through starvation by obtaining surpluses from the black earth zone can only be at the expense of the provisioning of Europe. They prevent the possibility of Germany holding out till the end of the war, they prevent Germany and Europe from resisting the blockade.<sup>87</sup>

On 16 June a final document appeared to be distributed as the official guidelines for the economic exploitation.<sup>88</sup> It reiterated the provisioning of the German army off

<sup>82</sup> Diary entry, July 1941, BAK N 1075, no. 20.

<sup>83</sup> See Alex J. Kay, ‘Germany’s Staatssekretäre, Mass Starvation and the Meeting of May 2, 1941’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41, 4 (2006), 685–700, 685.

<sup>84</sup> ‘Aktennotiz über die Besprechung der Staatssekretäre am 2.5.1941’, partially reprinted in Reinhard Rürup, ed., *Der Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion 1941–1945. Eine Dokumentation* (Berlin: Argon Verlag, 1991), 44.

<sup>85</sup> Kay, ‘Staatssekretäre’, and Kay, *Exploitation*, 125–6. See also Rürup, *Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion*, 44.

<sup>86</sup> ‘Wirtschaftspolitische Richtlinien des Wirtschaftsstabes Ost, Gruppe Landwirtschaft’. Partially reprinted in Rürup, *Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion*, 45.

<sup>87</sup> Here quoted from Kay, *Exploitation*, 134.

<sup>88</sup> The so-called ‘Green Folder’ or *Grüne Mappe*. Kay, *Exploitation*, 164–7.

the land, and the necessity of taking as much as possible of the agricultural produce and sending it to Germany. The starvation plan had become official policy.

Do these documents all bear Backe's imprint? In the 1941 introduction to his dissertation, Backe had not mentioned mass starvation, but he described Russia as the place where Europe needed to find its resources. Russia, or 'the Russian' had failed to use its resources and find its place in a European economy in the past. Now it was time for Germany to make things right: to use its resources to feed Europe in the short run and to increase Russian agricultural production in the long run.<sup>89</sup> His concept of a European continental market dominated by Germany appeared as the ultimate goal in the plans laid out in these documents. In a note to the heads of the regional peasant associations (*Kreislandwirtschaftsführer*) of 1 June 1941, Backe is even more explicit in his disdain for 'the Russian' and the necessity for economic exploitation. He warns of any 'false sympathy' for 'the Russian'. 'The Russian has already endured poverty, hunger and frugality for centuries . . . Do not attempt to apply the German standard of living as [your] yardstick and to alter the Russian way of life.'<sup>90</sup> In the technocratic language of the memo, Backe told the peasant leaders that 'the Russian stomach is stretchable'; he did not want to see any 'misplaced pity'.<sup>91</sup> Backe might not have been the sole author of the 'starvation policy', but his ideas can be recognised in the documents.<sup>92</sup>

The controversy in secondary literature goes beyond the question of authorship. Some historians maintain that Backe's plan to exploit agricultural production in western parts of the Soviet Union provided a 'solution' to the food crisis in Europe and assisted in the extermination of undesirable people.<sup>93</sup> They insinuate that the sudden deportation of the Hungarian Jews in 1944 was caused by the need to increase the food supply in western Europe and to get rid of 'extra eaters'.<sup>94</sup> Seen in this light, Backe's food policy directly influenced the decisions that led to the Final Solution and accelerated the mass murders in 1942.<sup>95</sup> The beginning of the destruction of Lithuanian Jewry coincided with a food crisis for the troops in the Heeresgruppe North, while food emergencies expedited the mass murders in Belarus in autumn 1941.<sup>96</sup> According to this interpretation, it was food and supply issues that determined the pace and the acceleration of the genocide of the Jews. Following

<sup>89</sup> Backe, *Die russische Getreidewirtschaft*, I–IV.

<sup>90</sup> Herbert Backe, '12 Gebote für das Verhalten der Deutschen im Osten und die Behandlung der Russen', 1 June 1941. Reprinted in Alleweldt, 'Herbert Backe', 96–100, and Rürup, *Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion*, 46. Here quoted from Kay, *Exploitation*, 167.

<sup>91</sup> Backe, '12 Gebote'.

<sup>92</sup> Backe committed suicide in his prison cell just one week after the prosecutors confronted him with the argument that he was the author of the 'hunger plan'. This, however, can hardly be taken as evidence for the existence of such a plan, as implied in Aly and Heim, *Vordenker der Vernichtung*, 393. See the protocol of Kempner's interrogation of Backe on 31 March 1947, BAK N 1470, no. 523.

<sup>93</sup> Aly and Heim, *Vordenker der Vernichtung*, 383–4.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 390–1. The authors acknowledge that they cannot prove this claim.

<sup>95</sup> Gerlach, *Krieg*, 154–6, 203, 229 and 233.

<sup>96</sup> Christian Gerlach, 'Militärische "Versorgungszwänge", Besatzungspolitik und Massenverbrechen: Die Rolle des Generalquartiermeisters des Heeres und seiner Dienststellen im Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion', in Norbert Frei, Sybille Steinbacher and Bernd C. Wagner, eds., *Ausbeutung, Vernichtung*

this line of reasoning, antisemitism and anti-Bolshevism were a precondition for mass murder, but economic concerns started the killing.<sup>97</sup>

This interpretation suggests a linear, planned sequence of events that becomes most clear from a historical vantage point. The genocide of the Lithuanian Jews occurred at a time when supplying German soldiers with food became difficult, but the timing does not prove a causal connection. The Final Solution evolved from a series of decisions that were made in 1941, and interpretations differ on the importance that food played in them.<sup>98</sup> While this article does not deal with the genesis of the 'final solution to the Jewish question', the starvation involving Soviet citizens also exemplifies that policymaking was contingent upon many factors and evolved rapidly. But even if there was no premeditated step-by-step plan to use food as a tool for genocide, Backe was responsible for setting food rationing and he oversaw its administration, knowing full well that this would mean hunger and starvation for millions of people. Many documents testify to Backe's desperation once Operation Barbarossa had begun, but his concern was not the fate of the Soviet, Polish and Jewish victims.<sup>99</sup> Backe's calculations became part of the *Generalplan Ost*, a plan that envisioned the massive resettlement of Germans in new territories. To achieve this goal, millions of Jews, Russians and Poles had to be dispersed and agriculture had to be reorganised according to German needs. Mass starvation was not the unexpected result of the course of the war and the transport crisis; it had been predicted.

There is no question that economic exploitation was a crucial factor in the war against the Soviet Union. Backe had formulated a policy that meant death by starvation for millions of Soviets. It is doubtful, however, that this was in the form of a detailed strategy meant to be followed. There were no exact plans of how to seal off the population in the 'deficiency regions', and no system in place that prevented the flight to rural areas. No doubt the misery, especially in the cities, was monstrous, and Backe did not reconsider his food policy once its consequences became clear.<sup>100</sup> These facts make Backe accountable for mass murder, but they do not prove that food policy was the driving force behind the Final Solution.

A different case in point, however, is the treatment of Soviet POWs. Here, food policy was more directly linked to genocide. Of the 3.3 million Soviet POWs who were taken captive, two million had died by February 1942.<sup>101</sup> This can be ascribed to

Öffentlichkeit. *Neue Studien zur Nationalsozialistischen Lagerpolitik*, (Munich: K.G. Sauer, 2000), 175–208, 195.

<sup>97</sup> Christian Gerlach, 'Deutsche Wirtschaftsinteressen, Besatzungspolitik und der Mord an den Juden in Weissrussland 1941–1943', in Ulrich Herbert, ed., *Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik 1939–1945. Neue Forschungen und Kontroversen* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998), 263–91, 289–91.

<sup>98</sup> See Christopher Browning, *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>99</sup> See Ursula Backe's diary entries, 22 Sept. and 5 Nov. 1941, and the numerous entries in May 1942, BAK N 1075, no. 20. See also Herbert Backe's letters to Ursula, 18 Aug. 1942 and 21 Aug. 1942, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

<sup>100</sup> See especially Karel C. Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair. Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>101</sup> Christian Streit, *Keine Kameraden. Die Wehrmacht und die sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen 1941–1945* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1978), 128.



a systematic policy of starvation and mass shootings. No clear directions were given on how much food POWs should receive, and Göring's directive of 16 September 1941 condemned non-working POWs to starvation. On 21 October the rations were lowered even further.<sup>102</sup> The clear premise was to give POWs only the absolutely necessary ration, since anything given to the Soviets meant 'stealing it' from Germans. 'Absolutely minimal' daily rations were set at 700–1,000 calories. In reality food portions did not even reach the official requirement. Death due to starvation was the calculated outcome of these rations.<sup>103</sup> The 'Reichenau Befehl' of 10 October 1941 confirmed this brutal stand, describing any feeding of Soviet civilians or POWs from German supplies as a 'misunderstood humanity'.<sup>104</sup>

Since Christian Streit's 1978 groundbreaking study of the treatment of Soviet POWs, the murder of the Soviet POWs has been understood as a genocidal massacre that was unimaginable on the western front. Racism and disregard for Slavic people's lives made the mass murder possible.<sup>105</sup> Difficulties of supply coupled with a logistics crisis and indifference to Soviet suffering all contributed to the mass starvation of people who, in the Nazis' eyes, did not deserve to live.<sup>106</sup> Only the need for workers in munitions and other German industries raised the question of increasing rations for the Soviet prisoners, since the work output of starving POWs was poor.<sup>107</sup> Money, scientific expertise and time were spent determining how much food was necessary to extract an optimum of labour without 'wasting' precious food resources.<sup>108</sup> In a meeting of 7 November 1941 called by Göring to consider Soviet forced labour, the

<sup>102</sup> Johannes Hürter, *Hitlers Heeführer. Die deutschen Oberbefehlshaber im Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion 1941/42* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2006), 370.

<sup>103</sup> Aly and Heim, *Vordenker der Vernichtung*, 388; and Streit, *Keine Kameraden*, 131.

<sup>104</sup> Hürter, *Hitlers Heeführer*, 496.

<sup>105</sup> Historians have debated the degree to which the mass killings had been planned and how involved the army was. See Christian Streit, 'Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene in deutscher Hand. Ein Forschungsüberblick', in Klaus-Dieter Müller, Konstantin Nikischkin and Günther Wagenlehner, eds., *Die Tragödie der Gefangenschaft in Deutschland und in der Sowjetunion 1941–1956* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1998), 281–90. See also Christian Gerlach, 'Die Verantwortung der Wehrmachtführung. Vergleichende Betrachtungen am Beispiel der sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen', in Christian Hartmann, Johannes Hueter, and Ulrike Jureit, eds., *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht. Bilanz einer Debatte* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2005), 40–9; Dietrich Eichholtz, 'Der Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion als Wirtschaftsexpansion und Raubkrieg', in Hartmann et al., *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht*, 125–35; Christian Streit, 'Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene—Massendeportationen—Zwangsarbeiter', in Wolfgang Michalka, ed., *Der zweite Weltkrieg. Analysen—Grundzüge—Forschungsbilanz* (Weyarn: Seehamer Verlag, 1989, 1997).

<sup>106</sup> Klaus Jochen Arnold, *Die Wehrmacht und die Besatzungspolitik in den besetzten Gebieten der Sowjetunion. Kriegsführung und Radikalisierung im 'Unternehmen Barbarossa'* (Berlin: Duncker & Humboldt, 2005), 400 ff. Christian Hartmann, 'Massensterben oder Massenvernichtung? Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene im Unternehmen Barbarossa'. Aus dem Tagebuch eines deutschen Lagerkommandanten', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 49 (2001), 97–158.

<sup>107</sup> Backe argued that Russian workers needed normal rations in order to work. He stated that his opinion differed from the agriculture department's official line. Ursula Backe's diary entry, 11 April 1942, BAK N 1075, no. 20.

<sup>108</sup> See Dietrich Eichholtz, 'Die 'Krautaktion'. Ruhrindustrie, Ernährungswissenschaft und Zwangsarbeit 1944', in Ulrich Herbert, ed., *Europa und der 'Reichseinsatz'. Ausländische Zivilarbeiter, Kriegsgefangene und Kz-Häftlinge in Deutschland 1938–1945* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 1991), 270–94. See also Heim, *Kalorien, Kautschuk, Karrieren*, 107–20.

Reich air marshal determined that the POWs needed to be fed to be used for labour, but ‘the Russian’ should not be ‘spoiled’ or get used to German food.<sup>109</sup> Backe, however, had the last word. In April 1942, Ursula Backe recorded in her diary, ‘One million Russians are to be used in the German arms industry. The Führer says to Saukel: Go first to Backe, he has to agree to feed them all’.<sup>110</sup> In October 1942 the rations for Soviet POWs were even lower than they had been in winter 1941.<sup>111</sup> Backe found these ‘inferior people’ contemptible.

Backe’s contempt seems even more astonishing when we recall that Backe had spent his childhood years in the Soviet Union. His family had lived in Russia for two generations, and documents paint the picture of a happy time for Herbert and his siblings and cousins, despite personal and economic hardships.<sup>112</sup> Backe’s father committed suicide when Herbert was a teenager, and the aftermath of the 1905 Revolution affected the family’s brewery business gravely. Backe’s own memoirs, written in 1946, mention his childhood in a positive light as well, but his Russian experience is tainted by the hardships during the First World War, his internment in a small village in the Ural mountains, and the chaos of the Bolshevik Revolution.<sup>113</sup> The uprooting and social decline of his family and the chaotic situation in Germany after the war definitely contributed to his political radicalism and anti-communism. Backe’s contempt for Russia found its murderous expression in the treatment of Soviet POWs under his direction.

### The end of two political careers

Backe oversaw food supply, transportation and rations throughout the last three years of the war. He was able to secure the food supply for Germans until winter 1944–5. In comparison with most other European countries, whether allied with Germany or under German occupation, Germans had more to eat.<sup>114</sup> Nazi agricultural and food policy avoided the food shortages that had plagued Germany during the First World War because of its ruthlessness and disregard for other people’s lives. Only during the last winter of the war did the food situation deteriorate dramatically in Germany. The military retreat, the loss of farm workers and machinery and the huge numbers of refugees brought hunger to Germany on a massive scale, and the food system collapsed with the Nazi regime.

Despite the difficulties and personal frustrations reflected in his letters to his wife and in her diary entries, Backe’s dedication to the job and to Hitler remained unshaken. ‘Are there others who sacrifice their lives for the mission as I do?’ he asked his wife in a letter of 21 August 1942. The documents are testimony of long

<sup>109</sup> Reprinted in Rürup, *Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion*, 198–200.

<sup>110</sup> Ursula Backe’s diary entry, 11 April 1942, BAK N 1075, no. 20.

<sup>111</sup> Streit, *Keine Kameraden*, 148.

<sup>112</sup> ‘Aufzeichnungen von Hortense Backe’. See also ‘Reisebriefe aus Tiflis 1912 von Onkel Agis’, letters from an uncle who visited the Backe family in the Caucasus. I would like to thank the Backe family for giving me a copy of a transcription of these letters.

<sup>113</sup> Backe, *Grosser Bericht*.

<sup>114</sup> Corni and Gies, *Brot – Butter – Kanonen*, 573, 575–82.

working days followed by physical exhaustion, nagging worries and moments of deep depression. Backe kept going because he felt that he was the only one who saw the bigger picture and would get the work done. He alone followed a 'much higher law' than all the 'small people' around him, who in Backe's view had only their personal advancement in mind.<sup>115</sup> In August 1944 he told his wife that he would fight until the end and never abandon his loyalty to Hitler: 'the last thought will be the Reich and its creator the Führer'.<sup>116</sup> Backe's letters from the last months and days of the war were increasingly filled with melancholy and self-doubt. His obsession over the lost cause consumed him, and he wondered whether he should have worried less about other people and their intrigues and instead focused more on the great vision of a transformed society. 'I accuse myself of not having fought harder. All I saw was the impossible Darré, who destroyed the work I had to do for the people. I have to admit that I wasn't great enough for this greater and more important task.'<sup>117</sup> He repeatedly told his wife to plan for the murder of their children because he did not want them to fall into the hands of the enemy.<sup>118</sup> He simply could not fathom a world without National Socialism. His letters contained tender comments for his wife, whom he admired for her strength especially during those hard times. 'I wish I had your will to live and your resources . . . It was you alone who strengthened me in my struggles, who supported me when I despaired.'<sup>119</sup>

Even when he was captured on 15 May and sent to the US headquarters in Reims, Backe believed that the British and Americans needed his expertise to avoid a large-scale famine. He prepared for a meeting with Eisenhower and was genuinely surprised when he was treated like a prisoner. Backe was convinced that he had done the right thing and was not guilty of any crime. He was unwilling to recognise the crimes committed in the name of his agricultural policy and even claimed that he had actually prevented hunger and starvation in the occupied territories.<sup>120</sup> In a letter to his wife of January 1946 he defended National Socialism as one of the greatest ideas of all time and revelled in the accomplishments of Nazi agricultural policy. 'I can say without vanity that the agrarian policy based on this idea [National Socialism] was an accomplishment that cannot be erased from history . . . National Socialism has proved itself right in the area of agriculture.'<sup>121</sup> His dedication and loyalty to National Socialist ideas were unaffected by the collapse around him.

Awaiting his trial in the Nuremberg prison, Backe had plenty of time to nourish feelings of being deeply wronged and unfairly accused. Shortly after being interrogated and accused of authorising the starvation of masses of Soviet citizens,

<sup>115</sup> Letters to Ursula, 21 Aug. 1942 and 2 Oct. 1944, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

<sup>116</sup> Letter to Ursula, 29 Aug. 1944, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

<sup>117</sup> Letter to Ursula, 4 Feb. 1945, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

<sup>118</sup> See letters, 23 Nov. 1944, 4 Feb. 1945 and 2 Aug. 1943, BAK N 1075, no. 1. See also Ursula Backe's diary entry, 7 Aug. 1944, BAK N 1075, no. 19.

<sup>119</sup> Letter to Ursula, 13 Nov. 1944, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

<sup>120</sup> See Backe's letter to Ursula, 31 Jan. 1946, 9, BAK N 1075, no. 1.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* He called the letter a 'draft of a testament' and explained his political motivations and ideas. See also Backe, *Grosser Bericht*.

Backe committed suicide in his Nuremberg prison cell on 6 April 1947.<sup>122</sup> Given the strict controls in place in the prison, Backe must have planned his suicide some time ahead. In hindsight some of the comments in his letters could be read as a foreshadowing of the suicide he planned. He might have also feared being handed over to the Soviets for trial.<sup>123</sup> It is hard to determine the ultimate motives, but, like his father a generation earlier, Backe took his own life.

Darré's story ended quite differently. After his dismissal on 13 May 1942, Darré lived the last years of the war secluded from politics, harbouring resentment about the way in which he had been treated. A sickly and depressed man who had lost all power and influence,<sup>124</sup> seeing the collapse all around him he started to think of a way of describing to posterity his own role.<sup>125</sup> In front of the Nuremberg judges Darré laid out and embellished his role as an outsider who was not one of the Nazi elite. He had no feeling of responsibility or guilt. On the contrary, Darré considered himself a victim. He even claimed that he had become a minister 'against his will'.<sup>126</sup> Darré said that he had opposed the Nazis' expansionist policy, and maintained that that was the reason he was dismissed. In one of the last Nuremberg trials, the *Wilhelmstrassenprozess*, Darré was sentenced to only seven years' imprisonment, including those he had already served in Nuremberg. He was released early, in 1950, and spent the last years of his life writing about organic farming. He died in 1953.

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The examination of the relationship between the two most powerful men in agricultural administration during the Third Reich has shed new light on Nazi food policy, the link between food and war and Backe's role in the starvation plan. Archival documents do not support Darré's self-portrayal as somebody who was ousted because he opposed the Nazi agrarian policy. He was outmanoeuvred by Backe, whose personality and expertise made him the more effective administrator during the war. Backe fits well into the group of ambitious young men of the

<sup>122</sup> Ursula Backe's diaries are very quiet about Herbert's death. She wrote in her diary only sporadically during this time. See BAK NL 1075, no. 21 and 22. The last letter Ursula received from Herbert was written on 28 March 1947. There is no indication that she knew about her husband's suicide plans or his motives. Maybe Backe realised that the Nuremberg judges would condemn his food policies. During the last interrogation before Backe's death, Robert Kempner confronted him with evidence for the 'hunger plan' that bore his handwriting. See the notes of the interrogation, BAK N 1470 Robert Kempner, no. 523. According to Backe's children, there were rumours that Backe would be sent to the USSR to be brought to trial there (conversation with Backe's children, 2 June 2004).

<sup>123</sup> Conversation with Backe's children, 2 June 2004.

<sup>124</sup> Darré had to give up his office in Berlin, and he begged Backe to let him keep at least a secretary. See Darré's letter, 26 Jan. 1943, BAK R 43 II, no. 657.

<sup>125</sup> Darré's (edited) diaries have no entries between March 1941 and October 1943. According to his long-time confidant Hans Deetjen, who edited the diaries in 1969 and burned the originals, this pause in entries was because of the hardships Darré endured after he was ousted. Deetjen assumes that Darré did not have the strength to keep a diary. See his explanation in the edited diaries, SAG N Darré, no. 484. Deetjen's depiction of Darré is apologetic in nature. He edited Darré's diaries with the intention of freeing Darré from any responsibility for the Nazi crimes. See also Gerhard, 'Richard Walther Darré'.

<sup>126</sup> IfZ ED 110, no. 3 561–70.

‘generation of the unbound’,<sup>127</sup> who had committed himself to the ‘historical mission’ and was determined to bring about the transformation of society. He had not fought in the First World War, but was influenced deeply by Germany’s defeat and the social, economic and political turmoil of the post-war years. After he finished his academic studies at the university, he became a practising farmer, but a few years later left farm work behind to follow what he experienced as a ‘higher calling’. Uncompromising, hardworking and completely devoted to the idea of *völkisch* renewal and German supremacy, he quickly rose through the ranks of the Nazi party to become the most senior food commissioner and a Reich minister in the Nazi regime. By 1941, Backe was the one in charge of food policy.

As the food expert on Göring’s staff, Backe was at the forefront of the economic planning for the invasion of the Soviet Union. He believed that the attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 would make natural resources available to feed Germans at home and at the front, at the expense of Soviet citizens in the industrial and urban centres, who would face terrible famine. In order to extract a maximum of food, resources in the occupied territories were ruthlessly exploited and rations for Soviet POWs lowered. Millions of people died as a consequence of this food policy, but this was considered the price of tough decision-making in the face of war against their greatest enemy. His drive for action left no room for empathy or pity.

Backe’s self-assessment at the end of the war resembles that of other Nazi administrators such as Werner Best, the head of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) and Reich Commissioner for occupied Denmark.<sup>128</sup> Backe escaped war crimes charges for different reasons from Best, but both were able to dismiss completely any feelings of guilt or responsibility for the suffering and death that occurred under their leadership. Although Backe committed suicide before he could be tried at Nuremberg, his family preserved the memory of the husband and father as a committed bureaucrat who carried out his duties and did the best he could for his people. The crimes committed while he was in charge were seen as unfortunate consequences of Backe’s policies that pursued a higher goal.<sup>129</sup>

In conclusion, Backe cannot be called the sole author of a premeditated ‘starvation plan’. Nazi food policy grew out of a racial ideology that Darré and Himmler had pursued from the beginning.<sup>130</sup> Until the end, Darré and Backe both believed in the blood-and-soil ideology and the future of a German Reich based on healthy, racially selected peasant farmers. Both embraced a racist understanding that foresaw Germans as the master race in a newly organised central European Reich. This vision required war and the forced resettlement of Slavs and Jews, who would at best become slave labourers. The archival documents show that famine and death was the anticipated consequence of this policy. From the beginning, food and war were inexorably linked in Nazi ideology; and Nazi food policy became more brutal as the war progressed.

<sup>127</sup> Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten: Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2003).

<sup>128</sup> Herbert, *Best*.

<sup>129</sup> Conversation with Backe’s children, 21 December 2007.

<sup>130</sup> Gerhard, ‘Breeding Pigs and People’, 129–146.