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Herbert Backe and the Reich Ministry for Food and Agriculture. Actions and Ideologies

Keywords

Herbert Backe | Agriculture Ministry | Food | Starvation Policy

Summary

This essay explores the connection between ideology and the actions of Herbert Backe. It argues that although he was a committed ideologue, the impetus for his actions is to be found more in the highly ideologized structures in which he was active – the Reich Ministry for Food and Agriculture and the Nazi government broadly. As such, it highlights the limits of strictly biographical understandings of Nazi perpetrators.

​Introduction

At its core, scholarly interest in Nazi ideology looks to explain why people complied with the radical demands of the Nazi regime. In comparison to earlier schools of interpretation, it asks what were the ideas that led to war, exploitation and mass murder, and how, if at all, individuals’ behaviour was shaped by them. It explores the connection between actions and ideas, in other words.

This essay explores that connection in relation to Herbert Backe, secretary of state, and later minister, in the Reich Ministry for Food and Agriculture (REM). Among other things, Backe conceived of and oversaw the so-called “Hunger Plan”, which sought to forcibly starve millions of people in the Soviet Union during World War II, and the essay will first outline these and other actions that we wish to explain, before examining whether ideology can, in fact, explain them. My contention here is that it can, but it is insufficient to explore Backe’s biography or account for his personal ideological beliefs in isolation, as occurs in much “perpetrator research”. As will be shown below, the ideas that led to murder and starvation were omnipresent across the Nazi regime, functioning both within and beyond the REM. For that reason, it is difficult to identify any individual’s personal beliefs as being determinant of their behaviour. Thus, it will be argued that while Backe was indeed a committed ideologue, much of the impetus behind his actions is to be found in the wider ideological structures in which he was active, such as the REM and the government broadly.

Actions

Backe first entered the REM in June 1933, after his mentor, the “Blood and Soil” ideologue Richard Walther Darré, replaced Alfred Hugenberg as Minister for Agriculture. Working first as a “commissioner for special tasks”, he became Darré’s number two and the ministry’s leading civil servant following his appointment as state secretary four months later. From the beginning, both men set out to achieve food autarky for Germany, and almost everything they did in office was geared towards that end.[[1]](#footnote-1) Early on, there were two major initiatives to achieve it. Firstly, there was the establishment of the Reich Food Estate, which aimed to control production and consumption in the food sector, and then there was the passing of the Hereditary Farm Law, which prevented the breakup of farms upon a farmer’s death by ensuring they could only be inherited by a single family member. One year later, the REM announced the “food production drive” (*Erzeugungsschlacht*), which aimed to stimulate food production, and Backe in particular was central to the initiative, introducing measures that aimed to modernise German farming.[[2]](#footnote-2)

During the war, it was Backe who was in charge of food policy; he was considered a better administrator than Darré, whom he effectively replaced as Minister from 1942, and he firmly believed that only the occupied territories’ brutal exploitation could prevent food shortages at home. This is why Hitler consulted Backe long before the invasion of the Soviet Union, and consistently liaised with him throughout the campaign. In particular, he was charged with ensuring that the three million-strong invading force would be fed on Soviet produce alone so that, again, Germans at home would not have to go hungry.[[3]](#footnote-3)

To achieve this, however, others would have to starve; such was the logic underpinning Backes’s so-called “Hunger Plan”, which divided the Soviet Union what he called a “surplus zone” and a “deficit zone”. Most food was produced in the “surplus zone”, and the plan foresaw expropriating it while also ensuring that people in the “deficit zone” – which comprised Belarus, northern and central Russia – were sealed off from all food supplies and left to starve. In the plan’s implementation, Backe insisted that the Soviet people, who had brought this fate upon themselves, should not be pitied. He also said that they had endured poverty, hunger and misery for centuries, and should therefore not be treated according to German standards.[[4]](#footnote-4) Roughly 5 million people died as a result of Backe’s “Hunger Plan”.[[5]](#footnote-5) When it was first conceived, it foresaw that tens of millions would starve.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Ideologies

Can ideology explain these actions? And if so, how? I maintain that it can, but it needs to be examined at three different levels: the individual, the ministerial, and the governmental. At each level, there was a connection between ideas and actions; Backe, the REM and the government broadly were all committed to ideas that culminated in the regime’s starvation policies: agrarian conservatism, anti-Russian sentiment, and the belief that Germany had lost WWI due to hunger-induced unrest on the home front. But when these levels are examined together, in the context of war and a dwindling food supply, we can see that the impetus for Backe’s actions can be found as much in the wider ideological structures in which he was active as in his personal ideological beliefs. Biography, in other words, does not tell us everything about the connection between ideas and actions in this instance.

Still, there can be little doubt that Herbert Backe was a committed ideologue. A recent study of the REM described his worldview as combining racial ideology with more conventional criticisms of market capitalism.[[7]](#footnote-7) And if we examine his biography, we can see that this is largely true. As a Nazi functionary, he was an advocate for agricultural and economic protectionism, the likes of which agrarian conservatives and some on the left were calling for. He also despised the welfare state and believed in a form of personal responsibility that was the hallmark of Italian fascist economic thinking.[[8]](#footnote-8) Underlying this was a deep anti-Semitism, with the Jews being blamed not only for Bolshevism and liberalism, which were part of the same Jewish conspiracy to secure world domination. He also blamed them for free trade, which he believed had led to an increase in famine since the 19th century and the displacement of peasant farmers, who ought to have been the linchpin of a healthy society.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Backe’s disdain for the Soviet Union and its citizens developed in stages. We saw above how it informed his starvation policy directives, but it is largely missing from earlier speeches and writings. Here, he railed against Bolshevism and the Bolsheviks, but not against the Soviet people as such.[[10]](#footnote-10) From around the mid-1920s, however, he did begin calling for colonial expansion into the region. This was necessary to secure food autarky, and to insulate Germany from the vagaries of the market. Combining contemporary concerns about capitalism with older imperial fantasies, Backe believed that Germans’ biggest problem was that they were a people without space, and so conquering that space in the east was an absolute necessity. The Soviet Union, conversely, needed to return to its natural role as Europe’s breadbasket, and the German plough should be deployed to enforce it.[[11]](#footnote-11) What this meant for the Soviet people is not explicitly addressed in Backe’s early speeches and writings, but the implications were clear: Germany had to secure control of the Soviet agricultural space, whatever the cost.

Backe spent his childhood in the Russian Empire, his family having emigrated there in the 19th century, but he was interned as an “enemy alien” during WWI, losing almost everything he owned.[[12]](#footnote-12) It is thus tempting to link his views on Russia and the Soviet Union to his personal experiences there. It is notable, however, that he was running in Nazi circles when he first expressed them, having joined the SA as a student in 1922. Such ideas were already commonplace in the burgeoning Nazi movement, so it is also possible that he first confronted them there. This helps explain why they were fused with the rabid anti-Semitism that was also the movement’s hallmark. Similarly, Backe’s first-known musings on agriculture and the world economy, which informed his analysis of the Soviet Union, came after he began studying the subject at university, while the difficulties he faced as a farmer during the Great Depression encouraged him to think further about global solutions to Germany’s agricultural and economic problems. Nazism provided those solutions for Backe, and like Nazism his worldview was also a product of the Weimar Republic.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Backe’s ideologies were not his own, in other words. They were widespread before 1933, and remained so afterwards, when they became a basis for government action. Indeed, if we look inside the REM we can see that all of its senior functionaries subscribed to similar ideas. Long before the Nazis came to power, the agriculture bureaucracy was known to be among the most reactionary in the administration.[[14]](#footnote-14) It remained so for the duration of the Weimar Republic, with the REM in particular being dominated by conservative nationalists.[[15]](#footnote-15) This, along with the lack of suitably experienced Nazis, helps explain why there was no significant purge of civil service personnel after 1933, at least not among the rank and file.[[16]](#footnote-16) There was significant upheaval at leadership level, however. Darré replaced Hugenberg as Minister in June, while Backe replaced Hans Joachim von Rohr as secretary of state four months later. Another of Darré’s men from the Nazi Party agricultural apparatus, Werner Willikens, joined as a second state secretary in 1935, and Hans-Joachim Riecke joined as ministerial mirector one year later. Each of these men were committed ideologues, and together they made “blood and soil” and food autarky the centre of the REM’s agenda.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Darré established and led the NSDAP’s agricultural apparatus and personally advised Hitler on agricultural policy from 1930.[[18]](#footnote-18) He advanced an extreme form of agrarian racism, believing that peasant farmers were the lifeblood the German race and that their existence was under threat from Jewish ideas that encouraged mobility, urbanisation and thus the depletion of the Aryan race. This message is hardly distinguishable from Backe’s, though Darré’s anti-Russian sentiment was slightly less pronounced than his protégé’s. Darré is even said to have been opposed to invading Russia, preferring a more limited military campaign in the east to what he called “foreign adventurism”.[[19]](#footnote-19) By that time, however, Backe had effectively replaced him as minister, and his protests should be viewed in the context of the power struggle between the two. Besides, Darré also saw bolshevism as a “Jewish cancer” that needed to be eradicated.[[20]](#footnote-20) Whatever their differences as administrators, scholars largely agree that their ideologies hardly differed.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Werner Willikens was also active in reactionary agrarian circles throughout the 1920s and a member of the NSDAP since 1925. He was the Party’s speaker on agriculture in the Reichstag from 1928, but his rise to prominence came three years later following the publication of his book, *National Socialist Agricultural Policy*, which contained all of the racial and ideological tropes for which Backe and Darré were famous and a call to establish a colonial empire. The extent to which Willikens’ ideological prescriptions reflected Darré’s and Backe’s is evidenced by the fact that the Darré wrote the foreword to the book and put both Willikens and Backe in charge of schooling civil servants in the ways of National Socialist agrarian policies once he became Minister.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Hans-Joachim Riecke, finally, was active in agrarian reactionary circles throughout the 1920s. He fought with the Freikorps after WWI and participated in the Kapp Putsch in 1920. He continued his underground efforts to topple the Weimar Republic as a member of the Bund Oberland, which had close connections to the NSDAP, joining the latter in 1925. He was a known anti-Semite and proponent of blood and soil ideology, and as he admitted after 1945, he was haunted by the idea that Germany had lost WWI not because it was defeated militarily but because of food supply issues. Preventing a repeat of this during WWII was his principal task in the REM.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The REM, then, was led by a cohort committed to a similar, if not identical worldview. Its rank-and-file civil servants, mostly agrarian reactionaries, were also subjected to intense ideological training that brought them up to speed on blood and soil ideas and Nazi agricultural policy generally. Backe, therefore, was operating in a highly ideologized organisation which, to a large degree, shaped the actions of its members, or at least limited their range of possible alternative actions. In such an environment, it is difficult to locate a direct causal relationship between any individual’s actions and their personal ideological beliefs, because the overall climate suggests that the actions would have been similar whoever occupied the post. The impetus for individual action, in other words, comes as much from the institution as from the individual.

In the “Third Reich”, however, the REM was itself part of a wider ideological superstructure which further determined the course of its actions, and those of its members: the government, with Hitler at the helm. He “vowed that Germans would never again experience hunger”, and such was his authority within the regime that there could be no deviation from this principle, which guided Nazi food policy from the start.[[24]](#footnote-24) Food autarky was to be achieved in peacetime or, failing that, food was to be simply taken during war. From where, exactly: Hitler had ideas about that too, writing in Mein Kampf that “if one wants space and soil in Europe, this can only be achieved at the cost of Russia”. Nor was he shy about the methods: the “German sword [should be used] to win soil for the German plough and daily bread for the nation”.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Such precepts were laid down long before WWII, before Backe could dream of taking control of the “Third Reich’s” food policy agenda. But even when he was in control, in the build-up to the invasion of the Soviet Union, it was still Hitler who set the tone for its brutal exploitation, telling generals in 1941 to expect mass shootings, ethnic cleansing and, of course, starvation. In calling for the harsh treatment of Soviet “sub-humans”, therefore, Backe, while also expressing his own beliefs, was responding to a set of ideological prescriptions set by the Führer.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The same was true of the government broadly. To prime Germans for the occupation and exploitation of the Soviet Union, the Nazi propaganda apparatus flooded the country with anti-Soviet propaganda, presenting the Soviet people as insatiably greedy and hungry, and blaming communists for bringing Europe’s most fertile region to the brink of starvation. In the Polish General Government, moreover, the Governor Hans Frank and his administration pursued their own starvation policies to help feed Reich Germans. Backe was only too happy to receive the Polish food surplus, but the initiative was Frank’s, who was also working in accordance with Hitler’s precepts to ensure that Germans would not again have to go hungry.[[27]](#footnote-27)

And herein lies the core tenet of the Nazi worldview from which starvation policy and the “Hunger Plan” flowed: the belief that Germany had lost WWI because of hunger-induced unrest on the home front. Far from being Backe’s invention, this was believed by millions and akin to Nazi Germany’s founding myth. It was particularly dangerous because it contained the assumption that there was little chance of winning a second war if Germans were not fed, and when that war eventually came, feeding them became necessary to secure the regime’s existence. The Nazi analysis of the First World War, in other words, limited the range of possible actions in the Second, and with food supplies dwindling from 1940, Backe, the REM and the regime had engineered for themselves a simple binary: us or them?

Conclusion

While Herbert Backe was undoubtedly an effective administrator of starvation policies, then, there are limits to what his ideological beliefs can tell us about the causal relationship between ideas and actions. Both the REM and the Nazi Regime were wholly committed to securing food autarky for Germany and ensuring that Germans would not again have to go hungry, which places the impetus for action as much at the ministerial and governmental levels as at the level of the individual. Indeed, it is quite possible to imagine some version of starvation policy having been pursued in Backe’s absence, given the level of support such ideas enjoyed in the government. No matter how committed an individual is to a particular worldview, they cannot be separated from their surroundings. This is something that strictly biographical understandings of Nazi perpetrators tend to lose sight of.

1. Gesine Gerhard, *Nazi Hunger Politics. A History of Food in the Third Reich* (Maryland, 2015), 77, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ​Bertold Alleweldt, *Herbert Backe. Eine politische Biographie* (Berlin, 2011), 38-42; Gerhard, *Hunger Politics*, 77-78, 52.​ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ​ Ibid, 82, 55, 85.​ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ​ Alleweldt, *Backe*, 68-69; Gerhard, *Hunger Politics*, 86, 91.​ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ​ Alex J. Kay, *Empire of Destruction. A History of Nazi Mass Killing* (New Haven, 2021), 167-168.​ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ​ Alex J. Kay, *Exploitation Resettlement, Mass Murder. Political and Economic Planning for German Occupation Policy in the Soviet Union, 1940-1941* (New York, 2006) 140.​ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ulrich Schlie, “Das Reichsministerium für Ernährung und Landwirtschaft in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus”, in *Agrarpolitik im 20. Jahrhundert. Das Bundesministerium für Ernährung und Landwirtschaft und seine Vorgänger*, eds. Horst Möller, Joachim Bitterlich, Gustavo Corni, Friedrich Kießling,m Daniela Münkel and Ulrich Schlie (Berlin, 2020), 126.​ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Speech by Backe in Göttingen circa 1923, German Federal Archive in Koblenz (from now BArch K) N 1075/5; Clara E. Mattei, *The Capital Order. How Economists Invented Austerity and Paved the Way to Fascism* (Chicago, 2022), 205-245. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction. The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London, 2007), 174-175; Backe’s Göttingen Speech, 1923, BArch K N 1075/5; Darren O’Byrne, “Political Civil Servants and the Practice of Administration under National Socialism” (unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2019)​, 125-126; Alleweldt, *Backe*, 28-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid​, 125. Schlie, “Das Reichsministerium”, 127-128. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Alleweldt, *Backe*, 33-45; Tooze, *Wages*,174-175, 179-80; Gerhard, *Hunger Politics*, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. ​ Alleweldt, *Backe*, 17-18; See also Backe’s Personnel File in the German Federal Archive in Berlin (from now BArch B), R 16-1/2; O’Byrne, “Political Civil Servants”, 81, 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Alleweldt, *Backe*, 20; See the personal correspondence between Backe and his wife Ursula, BArch K N 1075/23. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Otto Braun, *Von Weimar zu Hitler* (Zürich, 1940), 15-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Andreas Dornheim, *Rasse, Raum und Autarkie. Sachverständigengutachten zur Rolle des Reichministeriums für Ernährung und Landwirtschaft in der NS Zeit* (Berlin, 2011), 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Schlie, “Das Reichsministerium”, 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. ​Gerhard, *Hunger Politics*, 77.​ [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Horst Gies, “NSDAP und Landwirtschaft in der Endphase der Weimarer Republik”, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 15, no. 4 (1967): 342; ​Gustavo Corni, “Richard Walther Darré. Der „Blut-und-Boden“-Ideologe”, in *Die braune Elite I. 22 biographische* Skizzen, ed. Ronald Smelser, Enrico Syring, and Rainer Zitelmann (Darmstadt, 1999), 17-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. ​ Carroll P. Kakel III, *The American West and the Nazi East. A Comparative and Interpretive Perspective* (New York, 2011), 130.​ [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. ​R. Walther Darré, *Aufbruch des Bauerntums* (Berlin, 194), 80.​ [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. ​Alleweldt, *Backe*, 49; Gerhard, *Hunger Politics*, 81.​ [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. ​Werner Willikens, *Nationalsozialistische Agrarpolitik* (Munich, 1931); Gies, “NSDAP und Landwirtschaft”, 342; ​ Schlie, “Das Reichsministerium”, 117, 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Wigbert Benz, *Hans-Joachim Riecke, NS-Staatssekretär. Vom Hungerplaner vor, zum „Welternährer“ nach 1945* (Berlin, 2014), 17-19, 30; Reinhold Friedrich, *Spuren des Nationalsozialismus im bayerischen Oberland. Schliersee und Hausham zwischen 1933 und 1945* (Norderstedt, 2011), 84-85; Hans-Joachim Riecke, “Ernährung und Landwirtschaft im Kriege”, in *Bilanz des zweiten Weltkrieges. Erkenntnisse und Verpflichtungen für die Zukunft*, ed. Gerhard Stalling Verlag (Hamburg, 1953), 331-346; Schlie, “Das Reichsministerium”, 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. ​Gerhard, *Hunger Politics*, 29.​ [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. ​Cited in ibid, 40.​ [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. ​Alleweldt, *Backe*, 76-78.​ [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. ​Ibid, 55; Gerhard, *Hunger Politics*, 57.​ [↑](#footnote-ref-27)