



## Book Review

### **Nazi Hunger Politics: A History of Food in the Third Reich**

Gesine Gerhard, 2015

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A lot has been written about the German Third Reich's incorporation of eugenics into their system of political administration. However, seldom has there been an exposé of the use of food by the Nazis in their racial cleansing operations. Gesine Gerhard's seminal book *Nazi Hunger Politics* delves into the machinations of Hitler's regime courtesy of Richard Walter Darré, the first Reich Minister of Food and Agriculture, and his protégé Herbert Backe who succeeded him in the same position. Across six chapters, the author insightfully links together the logistical and scientific aspects of food production and the feeding of the German masses with the Nazi ideological notions of unrestrained patriotism, racial superiority and purity, and eugenic pseudoscience.

Gesine Gerhard achieved her doctorate in Modern German History in 2000 and went on to author a respectable spread of book chapters and journal articles relating to the use of agriculture and food as political and hegemonic tools by the Nazis. Her prior work, such as 'Food and genocide: Nazi agrarian food policy in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union' (2009) and 'Breeding pigs and people for the Third Reich: Richard Walter Darré's agrarian ideology' (2005) effectively illustrate that food production and its supply served as a veritable double-edged sword that cut both ways; a 'green' and environmental agenda on the one side and a eugenically driven genocidal policy on the other. Hence, Gerhard was well poised for expanding upon her initial exploration of the Third Reich's ideological stance of 'blood and soil' and the resulting diabolical campaign of exterminating racial undesirables for purifying the Nordic race.

What is unique about this work is that the author doesn't rely only on pre-existing historical records and secondary accounts to construct her analysis, but actually taps into a hitherto largely inaccessible source of information to bolster her research: the personal diaries of Herbert Backe's wife Ursula, covering a two-decade period from 1927 to 1947. These allowed Gerhard to peer into the past through the eyes of someone who had an intimate day-to-day connection with the implementer of the *Hungerplan*. In the Introduction section, the author explains that even after getting permission from Backe's surviving children for exhuming their mother's diaries and letters from the Federal Archives, she still had to decipher the outdated *Sütterlin* German script that Ursula Backe chose to employ in her personal reflections and communication with her husband.

Chapter 1 thus starts off by nestling the issue of food in the greater state machinery of Adolf Hitler's regime and then seasons it by adding a layered mix of religiosity, patriotism, racial integrity and rural agricultural pride. Having whetted the

reader's appetite, the book then goes on to explain the significance of food politics in garnering support for the barbarous Operation Barbarossa that subjected the Russian populace to the Greater German Reich's ruthless reach. The author also points out here that Darré used notions of agrarian superiority and pride to mobilize the *Landvolk* (peasantry) through the annual harvest festival, where Hitler was virtually elevated to the status of a demigod through a very Caesarian crowning of a laurel wreath (p. 43). Joseph Goebbels was instrumental in propagandizing the cult appeal of the festival. Moreover, agrarian ideology was interlinked with military might, with a grand display of German military power.

In the second chapter, the reader is informed about the German preparation for World War II by using the food economy apparatus. Food was now seen as not just a means of feeding people but also as a weapon to be wielded by the Nazi regime for increasing their dominance, which would be asserted by depriving other people of sustenance. Chapters 3 and 4 then form the centrepiece of the author's research in Herbert Backe's role as the executioner of Nazi food politics, of which Richard Walther Darré was the architect. In these pages, Gerhard further builds upon her thesis that the Nazis' ideals of racial purity and eugenics stemmed from food and agrarian notions. She explains that Darré was able to successfully mobilize various rural and agrarian bodies and rally them together in their collective grudge and apprehension against the urban centres, that were marked by their industrial and capitalistic functioning. Key to this was the Agrarian Apparatus that controlled the farmers' associations and the Reich Food Estate (*Reichsnährstand*, or the RNS) that was the linchpin of the entire food system (p. 77). However, Gerhard goes on to point out that, ironically, it was the RNS that laid the groundwork for the industrial approach towards food production, leading to full-scale commercialization.

Chapter 4 essentially dissects the *Hungerplan* of the 'Greater Third Reich', detailing how it was used to convert hunger and food deprivation into a weapon that was used against the Russians at the start of World War II. Using quotes from prominent Nazi leaders such as propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels and Hitler himself, the author illustrates how the *Hungerplan* was the true face of Operation Barbarossa, making a mockery of the non-aggression pact that had been signed with Stalin in 1939 (p. 87). The author explains that it was Backe's doctoral expertise in researching Soviet agriculture that posited him squarely as the central planner of the exploitation of the land and natural resources of Russia and other regions of the USSR such as Ukraine, as well as European countries such as Poland, leading to the establishment of a continental food market. The author embellishes the tapestry of historical accounts with intimate insights into the workings of Backe's mind through the letters he wrote to his wife, boasting about the 'big thing' that he was going to achieve, contingent on general approval (p. 89). The eugenic stance against the Soviets, Jews and other members of the German society that were doomed for extermination through food deprivation is sharply brought into context by the author referring to them as 'useless eaters', quoting Rolf-Dieter Muller (p. 93). This I believe is the same racial ideology that has persisted into the twenty-first century and has become a cornerstone of contemporary food security programmes.

Since mass food production and its selective distribution requires extensive research and experimentation, it was enlightening that the author chose to dedicate Chapter 5 to Nazi food science. Hence, this chapter explores the marriage that was created between the pseudoscience of eugenics and the plant-breeding research at the various institutes run by the notorious Kaiser Wilhelm Society. On a side note,

one of the major backers and funders of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institutes was not even a German entity; the US-based Rockefeller Foundation invested a total sum of then USD125000 over a period of six years from 1929 to 1935 towards what it termed as 'new projects' (Adams, 2005, p. 243). The author also fascinatingly reveals that the Nazi food scientists were well aware of the direct correlation between not just the number but also the quality of the calories made available to prisoners in their diet and their labour output. It makes one wonder that if such ruthless experimenters had determined the drawbacks of nutritional shortfalls for human health, wouldn't the so-called Green Revolution planners also have been cognizant of this fact before rolling out their calorie-intensive approach to food security. Perhaps they or their backers, such as the Rockefeller Foundation, were pushing forward their nutrient-deficit crops and their subsequent processed end products by design. In fact, the author explores something similar along these lines in Chapter 6; the role of American entities in re-engineering the European market under the pretext of post-war recovery by increasing the influx of products made in the United States, especially courtesy of the Marshall Plan

The author also presents a telling account in Chapter 5 of how the Nazi notions of conservation translated into a love of all things nature. However, the author explains that their characterization of being 'green' was an ironic rationalization of their abhorrence for certain segments of their society, complimenting their overt ideals of racial homogeneity. Furthermore, she goes on to allude to the intriguing parallels between Nazi environmentalism and the current crop of nature conservation pundits. She cites many a debate having asserted that the modern climate change club is an ideological repackaging of Third Reich's duplicitous and even occult natural practices, such as the anthroposophic grounding of alternative and organic farming as advanced by Rudolph Steiner and secretly endorsed by Darré (p. 115).

Chapter 6 is an effective capstone to the book and is a testament to the adage that what goes around, comes around. The author posits the Nazi hunger policies in the historical aftermath of the Second World War, contextualizing their failure being due to the breakdown of national infrastructure and an inflow of refugees from war-torn areas that immensely burdened the already strained food provisions. It is aptly pointed out that even while held in captivity in the Nuremberg prison and undergoing his trials, Backe had no regrets about his *Hungerplan* and moreover extolled the virtues of National Socialism in his final letters to his wife. Yet ironically, he took his own life in April 1947, presumably due to fear of being tried (p. 125).

After having read it, the book reinforced my earlier realizations that most modern-day food security interventions seem to be fashioned along the lines of the Third Reich's food and agriculture policies. They are masquerading as environmentally sustainable projects for tackling global and regional hunger, all the while harbouring agendas of political and corporate control of the food system and robbing local people of their food sovereignty, health and life.

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