

Herbert Backe, “Farmers in the Fight for Germany’s Food Self-Sufficiency” (1939)

Abstract

Herbert Backe (1896–1947), state secretary in the Reich Ministry of Food and Agriculture, was responsible for overseeing the wartime food industry and, within the framework of the National Socialist Four-Year Plan, nutrition issues as well. In this text, he discusses the role of agriculture in the “battle for production” [*Erzeugungsschlacht*] and describes how to increase agricultural productivity. He also presents measures to close the “fat gap.” According to Backe, the cultivation of certain forage plants, such as protein-rich sweet lupin, was a crucial precondition for livestock breeding. Additionally, he believed that the “fat gap” could be narrowed through whaling and by allotting more acreage to rapeseed and canola cultivation. Backe’s text on “Germany’s food self-sufficiency” can thus be understood as part of the National Socialist policy of autarky.

Source

Only a few weeks after the Führer proclaimed the Four-Year Plan in Nuremberg, the program of the Four-Year Plan for Agriculture was announced in November 1936 at the Fourth Reich Farmers’ Rally. The slogan was: “Produce even more than ever before.” The Plenipotentiary for the Four-Year Plan himself [Hermann Göring] spoke to the German farmers’ leaders and challenged them to become the storm battalion of the Four-Year Plan.

German agriculture had been called upon to wage the battle for production [*Erzeugungsschlacht*] as early as the fall of 1934. While the commercial economy had to start by aligning itself with the tasks of the Four-Year Plan, by the end of 1936, German farmers had already been marching in rank and file for two years to guarantee that Germany could feed itself from its own production to the greatest extent possible. Had the battle for production not commenced in such a timely manner, a great increase in food imports would have been necessary to cover the sharply rising consumption of foodstuffs. Given the scant foreign exchange reserves, this enormous increase in food imports would have made it impossible to simultaneously import the required quantities of raw materials needed for rearmament and for the build-up of new Four-Year Plan industries. Consequently, it is impossible to separate the achievements of the Four-Year Plan from those of the battle for production.

To increase agricultural production, we demanded a host of measures at the 1936 Reich Farmers’ Rally aimed at expanding the land area devoted to agricultural production. These measures included the initiation of ameliorative work, the acceleration of land consolidation, and the transformation of part of [Germany’s] meadowlands into arable farmland. The demand for plowing meadows derived from fact that the pastureland in Germany previously comprised about 30 percent of the area used for arable farming, but only contributed 10 percent to the total yield. The yields from arable farming have almost doubled in the last century. For pastureland, however, they increased by a third at most. In order to remedy this situation more quickly, since May 1, 1937, Reich subsidies have been granted for the improvement and plowing of previously poor pastureland, as well as for the fencing and subdivision of previously poor pastureland. Additionally, funds were made available for the procurement of the equipment required for the proper execution of plowing and maintenance work.

From 1937 to the end of December 1938, around 273,000 hectares [674,583 acres] of pastureland were plowed and about 280,000 hectares [691,880 acres] were subdivided and fenced. About 10 percent of all our meadowlands has thus been put to use in arable farming in less than two years, partly for mixed-use as meadow and pasture.

[...]

In addition to increased catch-cropping and increased construction of fodder silos, we continue to promote increased cultivation of sweet lupines in order to solve the silage issue for the light soils of the East and thereby create a healthy basis for livestock farming. Agriculture has also taken this path. Ten years ago, sweet lupine was still unknown in Germany. Since then, sweet lupine cultivation has developed from very modest beginnings as follows:

Cultivation of sweet lupine:

1935 12,000 hectares [29,652 acres]
1936 25,000 hectares [68,525 acres]
1937 48,000 hectares [131,568 acres]
1938 78,000 hectares [192,738 acres]

Therefore, sweet lupines today already account for two-thirds of the entire German lupine crop.

[...]

The most difficult problem for German nutrition is the fat problem. This finding, made two years ago, still applies today. Even today we must still import large quantities of fats, especially as the rise in income and population levels has led to more people consuming fats and to greater per-capita consumption. In light of the seriousness of the problem at hand, a range of efforts were made to augment domestic fat production. The increase was mainly achieved through Germany's resumption of whaling, the intensified cultivation of rapeseed and canola, the expansion of dairying and processing of dairy milk, enhanced output monitoring for milk cows, and not least through the improvement of mast [fruit from forest trees] for fattening pigs. The expansion of German whaling yielded for Germany:

in 1936/37.....35,000 tons of whale oil,
in 1937/38.....89,000 tons of whale oil,
in 1938/39 an estimated 100,000 to 110,000 tons of whale oil.

Therefore, today it is already possible to cover about 20 percent of the raw materials required for the margarine supply with German whaling.

From the standpoint of our fat supply, we can also report encouraging progress in the area of rapeseed and canola cultivation.

Land area devoted to the cultivation of rape and canola:

1933 5,000 hectares (12,355 acres)
1934 27,000 hectares (66,717 acres)
1935 47,000 hectares (116,137 acres)
1936 55,000 hectares (135,905 acres)
1937 50,000 hectares (123,550 acres)
1938 62,000 hectares (153,202 acres)

The rapeseed and canola harvest already amounted to 128,000 tons in 1938, compared to only 7,000 tons in 1933.

Therefore, in 1938, German rapeseed cultivation already yielded 44,500 tons of oil and 75,500 tons of oilcake. The oil yield from German rapeseed cultivation accounts for about 8 percent of total plant oil production in Germany. (From domestic and foreign raw materials.)

Of no little importance for closing the fat gap are: the expansion of the dairy sector undertaken in recent years, the dairy processing of milk, and enhanced output monitoring for milk cows. In 1936, 49.2 million Reich marks were spent on new construction and on the renovation of dairies, cheese factories, cream facilities, and milk collecting locations, as well as on expansions and [equipment] replacements. In 1937, 73.6 million Reich marks were spent on new construction, renovations, and expansions of the type cited. As a result, the milk collected from dairies increased from 13.1 billion kilograms in 1935 to 15.8 billion kilograms in 1937, and the milk churned in dairies rose from 8.22 billion kilograms to 10.5 billion kilograms. Consequently, butter production in dairies also rose from 224,500 tons in 1932 and 314,750 tons in 1935 to 420,576 tons in 1937. In contrast, farm butter production fell from 195,000 tons in 1932 to 100,000 tons in 1937, that is, just under half as much as the production of dairy butter rose. Total butter production was increased from 1932 by about 104,500 tons, or 25 percent. In the same period, butter imports also rose by 17,300 tons, or 20 percent. Despite this approximately 122,000-ton increase in the amount of butter available, it was necessary to place a limit on butter consumption. The significance of the dairy sector's expansion for our fat supply is also shown by the following calculation: if the amount of butter obtained from intensified collection and yield improvement in dairies had had to be covered by imports, then the following amounts would have had to be paid to foreign countries:

1936 96 million Reich marks
1937 141 million Reich marks

The corresponding figures are not available for 1938; however, with regard to the expansion of the dairy sector, they will exceed those for the previous years. Nevertheless, total butter production for 1938 will likely fall below production for 1937 by about 20,000 tons because of the effects of hoof-and-mouth disease, the unprofitability of the dairy industry, and not least the shortage of suitable milking personnel.

In lard production, we have suffered to this day from with the fact that our swine population has remained below the required level on account of the inadequate fodder supply in previous years.

Lard production:

1933 425,000 tons
1934 478,000 tons
1935 458,000 tons
1936 503,000 tons
1937 496,000 tons

However, on account of the fungibility of fats, and despite the increased domestic production of butter, lard, rapeseed oil, and whale oil, our total fat supply is still decisively determined by the fact that about 75 percent of the raw materials required for margarine production come from abroad—and about one-third of our total fat consumption consists of margarine. The fact that the raw materials needed for margarine production have to be imported from abroad (largely with hard currency) continues to be an aggravating factor. Our fat supply is, accordingly, still very closely tied to the amount of cash realized from our exports, although today, including whaling, we already produce 60 percent of our fat requirements ourselves, as compared

to only 45 percent in 1932. In view of the reduction in our foreign trade, which occurred again last year, this circumstance is particularly undesirable. New difficulties with respect to our fat supply are therefore inevitable if the current foreign trade developments continue. Naturally, that applies primarily to the margarine supply.

[...]

Source: Herbert Backe, "Bauerntum im Kampf um Deutschlands Nahrungsfreiheit," in *Der Vierjahresplan. Zeitschrift für nationalsozialistische Wirtschaftspolitik mit den amtlichen Mitteilungen des Beauftragten für den Vierjahresplan Ministerpräsident Reichsmarschall Göring*, 3. Jahrgang, 1939, pp. 111–16.

Translation: Kathleen Dell'Orto

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