

Hitler's War Aims

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Between 1939 and 1945, the German Reich dominated large parts of Europe. It has been estimated that by the end of 1941 approximately 180 million non-Germans lived under some form of German occupation. Inevitably, the experience and memory of the war for most Europeans is therefore linked less with military action and events than with Nazi (i.e. National Socialist) rule and the manifold expressions it took: insecurity and unlawfulness, constraints and compulsion, increasing difficult living conditions, coercive measures and arbitrary acts of force, which ultimately could threaten the very existence of peoples. Moreover, for those millions of human beings whose right to existence had been denied for political, social, or for – what the Nazis would term – ‘racial motives’ altogether, the implications and consequences of German conquest and occupation of Europe became even more oppressive and hounding.¹

German rule in Europe during the Second World War involved a great variety of policies in all countries under more or less permanent occupation, determined by political, strategically, economical and ideological factors. The apparent ‘lack of administrative unity’ (Hans Umbreit) in German occupied Europe was often lamented but never seriously re-considered.² The peculiar structure of the German ‘leader-state’ (Fuehrerstaat) and Hitler's obvious indifference in all matters of administration, above, his well known indecisiveness in internal matters of power, made all necessary changes, except those dictated by the war itself, largely obsolete. While in Eastern Europe the central purpose of Germany's conquest was to provide the master race with the required ‘living space’ (Lebensraum) for settlement as well as human and economic resources for total exploitation, the techniques for political rule and economic control appeared less brutal in Western Europe, largely in accordance with Hitler's racial and ideological views. This paper discusses the German Fuehrer's strive for a radical design of Western and Central Europe, Nazi colonisation strategies in Eastern Europe, and the effects of Germany's New Order concept as an integral and fundamental part of her war aims.

¹ cf. Robert Gildea, Olivier Wieviorka, Anette Warring (eds), *Surviving Hitler and Mussolini. Daily Life in occupied Europe* (Oxford/New York: Berg, 2006).

² For an overview cf. Hans Umbreit, ‘Auf dem Weg zur Kontinentalherrschaft’. In: Bernhard R. Kroener, Rolf-Dieter Müller, Hans Umbreit (eds), *Organisation und Mobilisierung des Deutschen Machtbereichs. Kriegsverwaltung, Wirtschaft und Personelle Ressourcen*. In: *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. 5,1 (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1988), pp. 3ff.

Hitler's Europe

The German-Greek historian Hagen Fleischer has presented us with an interesting synopsis of the Nazi rule and occupation of Europe. Fleischer distinguishes between two main categories of countries which fell victim to German expansionism: those states and territories whose conquest had been the result of Germany's 'hegemonic aspirations' - like Czechoslovakia, France and the Soviet Union - and those countries whose occupation had been necessary or inevitable for military or strategical reasons in order to secure the primary goals - like Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium and some Balkan states. Poland, like Yugoslavia, was placed between the two categories, since their fate and future role was decided upon only ex- post-facto. The occupation of other territories on the other hand, like Greece, Italy or Hungary – so Fleischer argues - had been the result of the war and was initially not part of German strategical aspirations.³

Fleischer's pragmatic distinction between political and ideological motives and military-strategical considerations is basically correct, but fails to acknowledge the existence of alternative strategies as well as the incomparable political style in which, often enough, ad-hoc decisions by Hitler were taken and implemented. Thus, if one wants to determine the relevant factors which shaped German decisions regarding occupied territories in Europe it seems necessary to take into account all relevant strategies and motives: political and historical, economical, ideological, ethnical and geographical as well as military-strategical considerations. The 'crushing' of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 and the division of France (initially into four governing areas) following her defeat in June 1940 were certainly instigated by Germany's urge for a radical revision of the Versailles treaty, as Goebbels' propaganda never grew tired of trumpeting to the German public. Equally important - as in the case of France - was the planning of the Wehrmacht High Command, the Foreign Ministry and other ministries and several Reich departments, who did borrow substantially from rather traditional war aims and Central European conceptions of Imperial Germany. And so was Hitler's ideologically motivated, almost complete denial of the right of smaller nations to exist in a future Nazi ruled Europe. He ultimately referred to them only as 'rubbish of small nations' (*Kleinstaatengeruempel*) that was to 'liquidated as far as possible'.⁴ Some of these small or middle-sized states were the direct result of the First World War and the new European order following the Paris peace treaties in 1919, which Hitler had promised to

³ Hagen Fleischer, 'Nationalsozialistische Besatzungsherrschaft im Vergleich. Versuch einer Synopsis'. In: Wolfgang Benz et al. (eds), *Anpassung, Kollaboration, Widerstand* (Berlin: Metropol, 1996), pp. 257-302.

⁴ *The Goebbels Diaries* (8 May 1943), trans. and ed. by L. P. Lochner (London, 1948), p. 279.

abolish altogether. But the German urge of breaking-up Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and, especially Poland, also contained elements of a certain psycho-pathological behaviour - not just on Hitler's side but also amongst the German political elites. Disagreement, however, continued to exist about the most suitable way to meet the Leader's wishes and demands.

Liquidation, albeit on an even greater, almost incomprehensible scale, was the ultimate goal of the most devastating campaign of modern warfare, the 'war of total destruction and annihilation' (Andreas Hillgruber) against the Soviet Union. Hitler's first indication of what Germany intended to do with the newly occupied Soviet territory is kept in the notes by his secretary Bormann of 16 July 1941: 'Basically, it is a matter of dividing up the giant cake so that we can first rule it, secondly administer it, and thirdly exploit it.'⁵ This was precisely the formula on which German policies in the east were going to enlarge upon, though not necessarily in that order. Like in Western Europe, there existed neither a clear political concept of what to do with eastern territories nor suitable and experienced personnel to administer 'the giant cake'. The majority of Hitler's 'new types of leader in the east' (Hans Mommsen) distinguished themselves by demonstrating extreme degrees of brutality and recklessness, but showing no further attachment to orderly administration or the rule of law. In essence, German occupation planning boiled down to the exercise of unrestricted, direct dominion of all conquered territories and to massive exploitation of the available economic and human resources.

The German Fuehrer's attitude towards the long desired German 'living space' in the east remained, as usual, vague and indecisive. If Hitler had any historical inspiration for the rule of the master race in Eastern Europe, then it was the Raj, the British Empire in India. 'What India was for England, the eastern territory will be for us', Hitler predicted in August 1941 while he was still celebrating the spectacular successes of the Wehrmacht in the first phase of operation Barbarossa, the German military campaign against the Soviet Union.⁶ Since the British were able to control - at the time - 400 million Indians with less than a quarter of a million men, thus ran Hitler's reasoning, it must be possible for the Germans to do the same in Russia: German 'farmer-soldiers' would live in beautiful settlements, linked by good roads to the nearest town. Beyond this there would be 'the other world' - uneducated, hard working Russian labourers with a poor standard of living. 'Should there be a revolution, all we need to do is drop a few bombs on their cities and the business will be over', Hitler declared in one of his notorious monologues to his faithful audience

⁵ Aktenvermerk [note for the files] Bo(rmann), 16 July 1941, International Military Tribunal (ed.), Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal-IMT, vol. 38, doc. 221-L (Nuremberg: 1947-9). For a general assessment of Hitler's strategy cf. Andreas Hillgruber, *Hitler's Strategie. Politik und Kriegführung 1940-1941* (Bonn: Bernard & Graefe, 1993).

⁶ cf. Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-1945: Nemesis* (London: Allen Lane, 2000), pp. 54-5.

during his frequent and notorious 'table talks'.⁷

Hitler's prevailing racist view is obvious, his primitive political and ideological ideas and goals speak for themselves. There seems to be a continuous line running from the penultimate chapter of *Mein Kampf* which finishes with the question of Eastern colonization ('Wiederaufnahme der Ostpolitik') to Hitler's early commitment in February 1933 to 'living space' in the East and ruthless Germanisation (as expressed in his confidential conversation with leading Reichswehr generals) up to the Führer's frequent utterances during the war with Russia. Guided by a strong conviction that the 'Slavic race' (slawische Rasse) occupied an inferior cultural and 'sub-human position' (Untermenschentum) and was thus not capable of creating its own order of state, Hitler took the existence of communist rule as ultimate proof for this. For him Soviet communism, or what he always preferred to coin 'Jewish Bolshevism', was not a Russian but an alien project. Communism could only have been successful because the Russian people were weak and inferior to other races. His ideologically motivated perception of the Soviet Union clearly led to his initial complete underestimation of the military, and also economic strength of the Russian enemy - a view Hitler was only gradually to adjust following Russian military successes over apparently superior German military forces.⁸

In the course of the war Hitler made it quite clear that there would be no anticipation of a future political design for Europe. Thus the hopes of political collaborationists for a genuine co-operation with the German Reich were brusquely brushed aside. Unlike Japanese war leaders who managed to enlist a number of Asian nationalists for a policy of strategical collaborationism (directed against unpopular European colonial regimes) Hitler deeply mistrusted all attempts of political collaboration. There existed no German equivalent of the Japanese slogan 'Asia for the Asians'. Germany never created anything comparable to the Greater East Asia Ministry through which the Japanese thought to run their wartime empire. The European fascist parties and their leaders in Nazi occupied countries, who had constantly demanded a fair share of power, were reduced to mere puppets and useful tools in the administration and economic exploitation of their respective countries. Quisling in Norway, Mussert in the Netherlands, Doriot and Déat in France, the Iron Guard in Rumania, the Arrow-Cross-Movement in Hungary – to name but a few of those ambitious and often ruthless collaborationists – they all had to realize that Hitler's European policy served one purpose only: to establish and strengthen Germany's superiority and power and give

⁷ *Monologe im Führer-Hauptquartier: 1941-1944. Die Aufzeichnungen Heinrich Heims*, ed. by Werner Jochmann (Hamburg: Knauss, 1980), p. 55 (8-11 Aug. 1941).

⁸ cf. Gerhard Hirschfeld, 'Nazi Germany and Eastern Europe'. In: Eduard Mühle (ed.): *Germany and the European East in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford/New York: Berg, 2003), pp. 67-90.

her maximum support for conducting the war. There had never been a real chance for a European partnership of all the radical right wing, authoritarian and fascist parties and movements. In this respect Hitler remained a staunch disciple of the nationalistic ideas of the 19th century. In his ideological premises and his 'Reich' thinking, Hitler always put the emphasis of his 'Germanic Empire of German Nations' on the word 'German'.⁹

Also outside Europe, Hitler's racial ideology and brutal 'realism' served him 'poorly'.¹⁰ He flatly disappointed all advances from Arab and Indian nationalists (like Subhas Chandra Bose) and neglected all opportunities to exploit national aspirations as a tool of political warfare, notably the disturbances and unrests that swept the Indian sub-continent during the summer of 1942. Despite occasional utterances and Goebbels propagandistic announcements that Germany was going to support Indian independence, Hitler continued to believe in the racial superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race and did not want to do anything that might hasten Britain's colonial downfall as 'a dominant race' (Milan Hauner). German strategy regarding India seemed to have failed since it concentrated almost exclusively 'on short military solutions'.¹¹ The assumption that Hitler would have therefore preferred an Anglo-German agreement (after an expected change of government and a radical political U-turn by London) to the strategical alliance with Imperial Japan – as some historians have argued – is however still an open question.

Occupation and Colonization

The chief responsibility for all colonization programs in the European East was entrusted to the Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler in his capacity as 'Reich Commissioner for the Consolidation of the Germanic People' (Reichskommissar für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums). The post had been established shortly after the occupation of Poland. Himmler was given a complete free hand, he could employ as much personnel as he thought necessary, and his specialists for race- and population policies followed right in the tracks of the advancing Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS-troops. Their first task was to administer the forcible evacuation (accompanied by mass killings) of roughly one million Poles and Jews from the annexed provinces of Warthegau and Danzig-West-Prussia to a newly created dumping ground, the Government-General (Generalgouvernement). Both Hitler and Himmler declared that they

⁹ idem, *Nazi Rule and Dutch Collaboration. The Netherlands under German Occupation, 1940-1945* (Oxford/New York/Hamburg: Berg, 1988), p. 32.

¹⁰ cf. Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire. How the Nazis ruled Europe* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), p. 588.

¹¹ cf. Milan Hauner, *India in Axis strategy. Germany, Japan, and Indian Nationalists in the Second World War*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), p. 620.

wanted to reduce the Polish population to a semi-illiterate mass whose main function was to serve Germany's economic interests, and thus to increase what they frequently referred to as 'Polish chaos'.¹²

The creation of new institutions, which often rested in the existing vacuum between state and party, contributed effectively - as the historian Hans Mommsen has suggested - to the ongoing process of increasing radicalization.¹³ Himmler's SS agencies, with the help of countless state- and party-organizations, not to mention university and even private research institutes, began to draft and initiate colonization plans for the European East. Doubtless, the most notorious resettlement scheme was the 'Master Plan for the East' (Generalplan Ost), which Himmler had commissioned just two days after the launch of operation Barbarossa; it was eventually completed in May 1942. The 'Master Plan for the East' envisaged the deportation of 45 million people, of whom 31 million were regarded as "racially undesirable" (in other words: dispensable), from Eastern Europe beyond the Urals and into Western Siberia.¹⁴ After the war, so-called soldier-settlers, tough SS war-veterans from all Germanic countries, were to populate Ukraine and Volga regions, where they would be defended from native revolts by German mobile defence forces.

In the meantime, Himmler had called for mass migration from the West to the East. But it was apparently easier to expel Russians and Poles from their homes than to find German, Dutch and Norwegian colonists to replace them. With the exception of approx. 600.000 repatriated 'ethnic Germans' (Volksdeutsche) from some 'liberated' parts of Russia and the Balkans, there was no sizeable migration from Central and Western Europe beyond the frontiers of the annexed Polish territories. However, the ideas of 're-settlement of people and the 'Germanisation' of the East were considered long-term projects. The result of German 'population policies' in the newly occupied Soviet territories was terrible enough: During the first nine month of the Russian campaign alone, the SS-Einsatzgruppen (plus a number of Police Battalions) systematically

¹² cf. Robert L. Koehl, *RKFDV: German Resettlement and Population Policy 1939-1945* (Cambridge: University Press, 1957); Götz Aly, *Endlösung. Völkerverschiebung und der Mord an den europäischen Juden* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1995).

¹³ cf. Hans Mommsen, 'The Realization of the Unthinkable: The "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" in the Third Reich'. In: Gerhard Hirschfeld (ed.), *The Policies of Genocide. Jews and Soviet Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), pp. 93-144.

¹⁴ cf. Mechthild Rössler/Sabine Schleiermacher (eds), *Der 'Generalplan Ost'. Hauptlinien der nationalsozialistischen Planungs- und Vernichtungspolitik* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993); the much discussed *Ostforschung* by German academics, among them a number of young historians who later became prominent professors, has been dealt with, among others, by Michael Burleigh, *Germany turns Eastwards. A Study of 'Ostforschung' in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: University Press, 1988); Michael Fahlbusch/Ingo Haar, *German Scholars and ethnic Cleansing 1920-1945* (Oxford/New York: Berghahn Books, 2005).

murdered more than one million Jews, Gypsies and other so-called 'unwanted elements'.¹⁵

But what about the German military, the Wehrmacht? Did at least the military provide some reason and common sense, maintaining law and order and engaging in a moderating role? German military administrations in occupied Europe were initially seen as temporary solutions, until the war situation had been stabilized and political conditions had been largely consolidated. For strategic considerations and due to lack of political initiatives some territories - like Belgium and northern France - were placed, for most of the war, under military rule. In addition, all battle zones and rear areas of military operations - like Serbia, southern Greece and, of course, large areas of the Soviet Union - remained under permanent authority of Wehrmacht commanders. The long treasured assessment that an apparently 'non-political' military government could safely be regarded as a warranty for moderation cannot be longer endorsed - perhaps with the possible exception of some Western (Belgium) and Northern European territories during the first phase of occupation. However, the differences were not so pronounced when the military authorities were asked to support or even implement Nazi 'population policies'.¹⁶

The motives for such accommodating behaviour should not be seen in individual racist or anti-Semitic prejudices of senior Wehrmacht officers alone though these certainly existed. Rather, there seems to have been a general eagerness within military administrations - be they part of a civilian (as in the Netherlands or Norway) or military government (as in France, Serbia or southern Greece) - to avoid the impression that they just presented the back area of the war and did not share wider political responsibilities. In this respect military commanders in their role as occupying authorities did enjoy support from the very top of the Wehrmacht and Army High Commands, whose representatives had already successfully proven that the Wehrmacht was to be reckoned with as a political instrument and as an institution that had long become an integral part of the Nazi regime.

The relationship between Hitler and (his chosen) supreme military commanders with regard to Eastern Europe was, despite existing controversies about a number of operational and tactical matters, determined by a considerable consensus. As the historian Jürgen Förster has stated, military leaders on the eve of the Second World War did not merely comply with the Fuehrer's

¹⁵ cf. Aly, *Endlösung*; Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992); Peter Klein/Andrj Angrick (eds), *Die Einsatzgruppen in der besetzten Sowjetunion 1941/42. Die Tätigkeits- und Lageberichte des Chefs der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD* (Berlin: Hentich, 1997).

¹⁶ cf. Christian Streit, 'The German Army and the Policies of Genocide'. In: Hirschfeld (ed.), *Policies of Genocide*, pp. 1-14; Jürgen Förster, 'The German Army and the Ideological War against the Soviet Union'. In: *ibid.*, pp. 15-29; Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army. Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (Oxford/New York: University Press, 1992).

political views, most of them were in full agreement: the adversary in the East was considered to be the enemy per se. Anti-communism combined with a racist anti-Slavic and often anti-Jewish attitude formed a highly explosive mixture, which the regime could ignite at any minute.¹⁷

The responsibility of the Wehrmacht leadership for as well as the active involvement of entire army units in the on going 'war of annihilation' against the Soviet Union and in some parts of the Balkan has by now been well documented and discussed.¹⁸ What is less known and certainly needs further research is the particular role of regional and local military administrations (Ortskommandanturen). The 'barbarization of warfare' (Omer Bartov) on the Eastern front was often enough the result of decisions and initiatives taken on a local or regional level. In order to understand and analyze the background to numerous atrocities and mass murders committed in local surroundings, it is also necessary to establish the respective social and administrative contexts - what has been called a 'situational explanation' - of which local military administrations formed an essential part.¹⁹ Equally, little is known about the role of regional and local military administrations in occupied Western and Northern Europe. The existence of extensive networks of Wehrmacht offices and departments (often with attached economic and administrative experts) on every level suggests that the influence of German military in some occupied areas has been far greater than previously thought.

Germany's 'New Order'

Initially the term 'New Order' had solely been used to describe the reorganization of the European national economies. Though no complete and comprehensive official program for the establishment of the 'New Economic Order' was ever published, civil servants, economists, industrialists and bankers produced hundreds of statements, memoranda and plans. What emerges from all these papers and discussions is a rather detailed picture of the New Europe that the Nazis

¹⁷ Förster (n. 16), p. 16.

¹⁸ cf. Hannes Heer/Klaus Naumann (eds), *Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941-1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1995) and the revised edition of the catalogue for the travelling exhibition presented by the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung (ed.), *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht. Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges 1941-1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2002; for an evaluation of both Wehrmacht exhibitions see SHOJI, Jun'ichiro, 'Exhibition of the "Past" and Historical Recognition in the Unified Germany – concerning the Holocaust'. In. *NIDS Security Reports*, no. 2 (March 2001), pp. 68-92.

¹⁹ cf. Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front 1941-45. German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (London/New York: Macmillan, 1985); Theo Schulte, *The German Army and Nazi Policies in Occupied Russia* (Oxford/New York: Berg, 1989); a good overview of scholarly works on Germany's war in Eastern Europe has been provided by Rolf-Dieter Müller and Gerd R. Ueberschär, *Hitler's War in the East. A critical assessment* (Providence/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2001).

planned after Germany had won the war: The basis of the new economic order was the formation of a single economic community working under German command; centralized planning had to take the place of unorganized liberalism, though there would be no nationalization or expropriation of private industries. Government control over industries along the lines existing in the Reich was envisaged and suggestions were made that international cartels might be enlarged and strengthened. The newly created 'greater area economy' (Großraumwirtschaft) would ensure free-flowing trade, harmonize the complimentary economies of industrial and agricultural countries and largely free Europe of its old dependence on overseas supplies.²⁰

However, reality was very different. The so-called 'new order plans' or 'peace plans' by Germany's large industrial firms and economic associations simply articulated the massive demands of individual big companies and branches of industry against the national economies of the conquered and occupied territories in Europe. Despite the verbal gloss, German economists, industrialists and politicians, and, above all, the very economic results of occupation left no doubt as to who would control and benefit from the New Europe. The British historian Alan Milward has expressed this fact in a simple and concise formula: 'there was little that was new and less that was orderly in the "New Order"'.²¹ Solely in economic terms the new German empire in Europe, had it ever been completed, would have been a large-scale structure organized for and run on the principles of colonialism of the crudest kind. Thus Germany's economic policy towards the occupied countries, despite differing aims and objectives, can in essence be summed up in two terms: exploitation and expropriation.

In Western Europe, where the techniques of economic exploitation appeared less brutal than in the eastern parts of the continent, the result in pure financial terms was equally devastating. At the very outset, there was a brief period of pillaging, mostly directed against each country's war materials (stockpiles of raw materials and other essential goods). This 'uncontrolled period' was soon followed by more or less formal agreements and arrangements between a number of German agencies (Armament Inspectorates, Central Order Offices, etc.), native industries, and civil administrations, which led to a continuous flow of raw materials and goods into Germany.²²

France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Norway (later Denmark, Greece and Yugoslavia) were saddled with the cost of supporting the occupying authorities (in particular Wehrmacht

²⁰ See the article by Reich Economic Minister Walther Funk, 'Die wirtschaftliche Neuordnung Europas'. In: *Monatshefte für Internationale Politik*, 1940, pp. 630ff; cf. Jean Freymond, *Le IIIe Reich et la reorganisation économique de l'Europe 1940-1942. Origines et projets* (Geneva: Institut Universitaire des Hautes Etudes Internationales, 1974).

²¹ Alan S. Milward, *Die deutsche Kriegswirtschaft 1939-1945*, Stuttgart 1966, p. 51.

²² For this and the following cf. *idem*, *New Order and the French Economy* (Oxford: University Press, 1970); Hirschfeld, *Nazi Rule and Dutch Collaboration*, ch. 5.

troops). The assessments were astronomically inflated. From 1940 to 1944, France paid approximately ten times the actual costs of the military occupation, as did the Netherlands. This means in fact that the on-going war was to a large extent financed by the occupied territories themselves. The German soldier (through direct pay and supplements as well as through pensions and social benefits) was by far the best-paid soldier in modern history. The occupation costs that Germany gained from all occupied countries during this time amounted to nearly 40 per cent of her revenues.

Naturally, economic conditions in occupied territories varied considerably, and not just between Eastern and Western Europe. Occasionally we see obvious economic discrepancies even within one occupied country or between countries of similar political alignment. One example is the differing standards of living in Western and central Eastern Europe. Thus Germany's allies Italy (until 1944), Slovakia, Romania and Croatia had significantly lower rates of bread supplies throughout the war than most occupied western and northern countries. This, however, changed dramatically after the summer of 1944, when military and political events following the Western Allied invasion led to an almost total collapse of the transport system causing catastrophic bottlenecks in food supplies for most European countries.²³

As far as Eastern Europe was concerned, the question of food or, rather, the scarcity of it became one of the hallmarks of German occupational rule. The strategy of securing food supplies for the Reich from agriculturally dominated territories like Ukraine and Byelorussia, at the expense of the native population, was largely responsible for the total destruction of all existing economic structures. It seems that a strong causal connection existed between German economic (i.e. agricultural) interests and the implementation of mass starvation and, in the end, also murder on a large scale.²⁴ The balance sheet for Byelorussia alone comprises 1.6 to 1.7 million deaths, among them 500.000 Jews and a further 700.000 prisoners of war, who died in Wehrmacht custody there.²⁵ This was only a fraction of the more than two million of Soviet POWs who died during the first eight months of their captivity, mostly of malnutrition and endemic diseases. It was not the result of a self-inflicted predicament (too many prisoners and not enough camps) – as was later argued by many German generals – but a deliberate decision by the Wehrmacht High Command to keep Soviet prisoners at starvation level. General Thomas, head of the Army's Office of the War Economy (Wehrwirtschaftsamt), even supplied and presented the rationale behind it.

²³ cf. Richard Overy (ed.), *Die Neuordnung Europas. NS-Wirtschaftspolitik in den besetzten Gebieten* (Berlin: Metropol, 1997).

²⁴ cf. Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde. Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1999).

²⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 1126ff.

Thomas' own guidelines to German local agricultural leaders in the East stated: 'The Russians have been putting up with poverty, hunger and misery for centuries. Their stomachs are flexible – therefore, no misplaced sympathy'.²⁶ This racially motivated decision stood in sharp contrast to the treatment of Western allied POWs but followed directly from the orders and instructions given by Hitler on the eve of the Russian campaign, notably the infamous Commissar Order (Kommissarbefehl) and the Barbarossa directive.

To sum up: Looking at Germany's war aims during the Second World War one has to distinguish between those short-term objectives that had a great deal to do with reversing the results of the First World War, notably the abolition of the international political system created by the Paris peace treaties in 1919, and Hitler's radical intentions for ruling and exploiting large parts of Europe, particularly in the east. The German Fuehrer's aspirations for 'living space' in Eastern Europe were as much dictated by megalomaniac, imperialistic designs as by a his primitive and ferocious racism. In essence, Germany's war aims and her occupying policies boiled down to the exercise of unrestricted, direct domination of all conquered territories and to the massive exploitation of all available economic and human resources.

²⁶ See the 'Twelve commands for Germans in the East [and the treatment of the Russian population]' quoted by Christian Streit, *Keine Kameraden. Die Wehrmacht und die sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen, 1941-1945*, new edn (Bonn: Dietz, 1997), p. 65.