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Klaus Jochen Arnold and Gert C. Lübbers

The Meeting of the Staatssekretäre on 2 May 1941 and the Wehrmacht: A Document up for Discussion

Writing in the *Journal of Contemporary History* in 2004, Richard J. Evans drew attention to some disturbing new trends within research into National Socialism:

Since the early 1990s, the historiography of the Third Reich has become not more scholarly, more neutral, more academic, but less so. Historians, far from increasingly approaching the subject *sine ira et studio*, have shown a growing tendency to abandon analysis, argument and interpretation in favour of the exercise of moral judgement. The historiography of Nazi Germany has been invaded, even taken over, to a striking degree by the language of the court prosecutor and the sermonizing moralist.¹

Evans's judgement is borne out, not least, in the case of the growing body of scholarly work on the role of the Wehrmacht within the National Socialist dictatorship. Many recent studies in this field have made ideological plans for annihilation the centrepiece of their analysis, often arguing in particular that the behaviour of soldiers and officers was in close conformity with National Socialist ideology. Alongside this trend there has often been a neglect of chronology and a reductivist treatment of complex sets of circumstances. The way in which war was conducted by other powers — and thus the violent reality of war — has frequently been played down. Sweeping hypotheses have been constructed on the basis of single documents, while passages, sentences and individual words have been interpreted not as contemporaries would have understood them, but in terms of present-day criteria. The article by Alex J. Kay on the meeting of the Staatssekretäre on 2 May 1941 may serve to illustrate some of these problems.²

Operation 'Barbarossa', the German attack on the Soviet Union, was the first campaign waged by the Third Reich to be based on specific economic goals and plans. In the process of preparing for the campaign, a meeting was held on 2 May 1941, the contents of which are known only from a set of minutes used as evidence in the Nuremberg trials. This document records the view expressed at the meeting that 'tens of millions' (*zig Millionen*) of people would starve to death if the food supplies that were needed by the Greater

1 Richard J. Evans, 'Introduction', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39(2) (2004), 163.

2 Alex J. Kay, 'Germany's Staatssekretäre, Mass Starvation and the Meeting of 2 May 1941', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41(4) (2006), 685–700.

German Reich (*das für uns Notwendige*) in wartime were to be taken from the occupied areas of the Soviet Union. The rationale was that in the third year of the war the German Wehrmacht should be fed from within Russia.³ In the eyes of those historians who have claimed that the German leadership implemented a ‘starvation policy’ (a *Hungerplan*, or ‘hunger plan’) against the Soviet civilian population and the prisoners of war, this set of minutes is of central importance.⁴ However, while no one denies that ideas of this sort were worked out, on Hitler’s instructions, by the Staatssekretär in the Reich Ministry of Food, Herbert Backe, there are wide divergences of view concerning the role of the Wehrmacht, the actual significance of these plans in the orders governing the invasion of 22 June 1941 and the part that the plans played as events unfolded in the summer of that year.⁵ Alex J. Kay claims that the true importance of the meeting of 2 May 1941 has not been sufficient recognized⁶ and that, in the light of the ‘starvation policy’ formulated on that occasion, the meeting was as significant as the Wannsee conference of January 1942 and the plan to murder all Jews in the German sphere of control.⁷ At both meetings, he maintains, the murder of millions of people was discussed; at both meetings, likewise, specific functionaries within the Third Reich — namely, Staatssekretäre in government ministries (roughly equivalent to permanent (under-) secretaries within the British civil service) — exerted a crucial influence over the decisions that were taken and, hence, over the Third Reich’s policy of murder.⁸ Historians, Kay says, have been deterred from giving due prominence to the meeting because the list of those attending is missing.⁹ In support of his

3 Stab Ia, ‘Aktennotiz über das Ergebnis der heutigen Besprechung mit den Staatssekretären über Barbarossa’, 2 May 1941, in *Der Prozeß gegen die Hauptkriegsverbrecher vor dem Internationalen Militärgerichtshof* (hereafter *IMT*), 42 vols, Nuremberg 1947–1949, vol. 31, 84 (Nbg.Dok. PS 2718). In the minutes the removal of oilseed and grain was emphasized. If the ‘available fat and meat will in all probability be consumed by the troops’, it is clear that grain and oilseed should also be removed to the Reich.

4 Cf. Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde. Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg 1999), 46–80. Recently Johannes Hürter has criticized the use of the expression *Hungerplan* and argued in favour of the term *Hungerkalkül* (‘hunger calculus’): cf. Johannes Hürter, *Hitlers Heerführer. Die deutschen Oberbefehlshaber im Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion 1941–42* (Munich 2006), 491. Alex J. Kay himself, in his book, while assuming that the ‘starvation policy’ was of relevance and that there was general agreement on the issue, also says: ‘The *Hungerpolitik* was merely a concept — there was no clear idea among the economic planners as to how this policy was in fact to be implemented.’ Cf. Alex J. Kay, *Exploitation, Resettlement, Mass Murder: Political and Economic Planning for German Occupation Policy in the Soviet Union 1940–1941* (New York/Oxford 2006), 206f.; and 124 for Soviet POWs as perfect victims of starvation policy. See also Kay, ‘Staatssekretäre’, op. cit., 699.

5 Cf. Klaus Jochen Arnold, *Die Wehrmacht und die Besatzungspolitik in den besetzten Gebieten der Sowjetunion. Kriegführung und Radikalisierung im ‘Unternehmen Barbarossa’* (Berlin 2005), 74–101 and 242–67.

6 His argument follows the thesis put forward by Gerlach in 1999 in *Morde*, op. cit., 46. Cf. Kay, ‘Staatssekretäre’, op. cit., 689.

7 *Ibid.*, 688f, 695ff.

8 *Ibid.*, *passim*.

9 *Ibid.*, 689.

thesis that the meeting of 2 May 1941 was a highly significant one, Kay sets the number of participants at the highest level possible, implying that the greater the number of Staatssekretäre present, the more solidly founded the planned policy of hunger was. If, though, we are to make a proper assessment of the importance of this meeting, attended by an unknown number of participants, we first need to see it in the wider context of German planning for the war in the East and against the background of power relations within the Third Reich generally.

The immediate spur for the meeting of 2 May 1941 was an invitation issued by General Georg Thomas, head of the War Economy and Armaments Office (Wehrwirtschafts- und Rüstungsamt, or Wi Rü Amt) in the Wehrmacht High Command (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, OKW). At the end of February 1941 Reich Marshal Hermann Göring, in his capacity as Plenipotentiary for the Four-Year Plan, had tasked Thomas with developing a broad economic plan for the eastern territories that were to be occupied. The commission primarily involved setting up an organizational structure and was not concerned with the goals or methods of the policy of occupation. The War Economy and Armaments Office, through its armaments departments, had been involved in previous campaigns, achieving varying success in exploiting the newly occupied territories for the benefit of the war industries. Since other Reich departments were similarly interested in tapping the economic potential of the conquered countries, there were permanent frictions and conflicts. With his powerful planning organization, Göring had managed to assume the lead role in this plundering of half of Europe. Each new territorial conquest was followed by an enlargement, through a 'decree of the Führer', of the powers of the Four-Year Plan.¹⁰ General Thomas was subject to Göring's orders via the Ministerial Council for the Defence of the Reich, chaired by the Reich Marshal, which had been set up at the start of the war in 1939.¹¹ In addition, at the outbreak of war Thomas was appointed to the expanded General Council for the Four-Year Plan, on which sat Staatssekretäre of the ministries, again under Göring's chairmanship.¹² To all intents and purposes, especially

10 Johannes Houwink ten Cate, 'Die rüstungswirtschaftliche Ausnutzung Westeuropas während der ersten Kriegshälfte', in: Johannes Houwink ten Cate and Gerhard Otto (eds), *Das organisierte Chaos. 'Ämterdarwinismus' und 'Gesinnungsethik'. Determinanten nationalsozialistischer Besatzungsherrschaft* (Berlin 1999), 173–98, esp. 177f. Kay himself noticed that the Office of the Four-Year Plan 'possessed overall control of economic policy Europe-wide': Kay, 'Staatssekretäre', op. cit., 696.

11 'Protokolle der Sitzungen des Ministerrates für die Reichsverteidigung 1939', in: *IMT*, vol. 31, 224–39 (Nbg.Dok. 2852).

12 Cf. Rolf-Dieter Müller, 'Die Mobilisierung der deutschen Wirtschaft für Hitlers Kriegsführung', in: *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. 5/1, *Organisation und Mobilisierung des deutschen Machtbereichs* (Stuttgart 1988), 349–689, esp. 414f.; Georg Thomas, *Geschichte der deutschen Wehr- und Rüstungswirtschaft (1918–1943/45)*, ed. Wolfgang Birkenfeld (Boppard am Rhein 1966), 175. See also Franz Halder, *Kriegstagebuch. Tägliche Aufzeichnungen des Chefs des Generalstabs des Heeres 1939–1942* (hereafter KTB Halder), ed. Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, vol. 1 (Stuttgart 1962), 27 (23 August 1939).

for matters in the occupied territories, the War Economy and Armaments Office was subordinated to the Four-Year Plan, which was Göring's responsibility.¹³

According to Göring's instructions, the broad economic organization for the eastern territories that Thomas was to set up would be responsible not only for armaments, as in earlier campaigns, but for all economic matters, such as agriculture and food production. As far as the latter task was concerned, the Staatssekretär in the Reich Ministry of Food, Herbert Backe, had already received a 'special mission' from Hitler in February 1941.¹⁴ Backe alone had commended to Hitler the gains in food supplies that might be expected from the occupation of Soviet territory,¹⁵ particularly emphasizing the importance of the Ukraine: the Ukraine alone, he said, was a 'surplus territory [*Überschußgebiet* — a region producing a food surplus], while the whole of European Russia was not'.¹⁶ At the beginning of March 1941, in order to forestall any discussion about the consequences of the interdiction doctrine that Backe later formulated in the notorious 'Economic Policy Guidelines' of 23 May 1941¹⁷ — namely, the cutting-off of supplies to the Greater Russian 'deficit territories', leading to the starvation of the population of large areas — Hitler forbade further conversations between Wehrmacht departments and Backe.¹⁸ Since the time of the so-called 'Thomas memorandum'¹⁹ on the 'effects on the war industries of an operation in the east', Hitler himself was aware of various concerns that an operation in the East might not be economically successful.²⁰ Backe was required to keep the preparations for the Russian campaign secret even from his own minister.²¹

13 Houwink ten Cate, 'Rüstungswirtschaftliche Ausnutzung', op. cit., 178.

14 KTB Wi Rü Amt/Stab, 'Vortrag Amtschef beim Reichsmarschall am 26.2.1941', Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg (hereafter BA-MA), RW 19/164; Rü Ic, 'Aktennotiz über Besprechung bei General Thomas am 28.2.1941', 1 March 1941, in: *IMT*, vol. 27, 169ff. (Nbg.Dok. PS 1417). Cf. the undated handwritten draft of organization, point 2: 'All covering war industry — not food (Staatssekretär Backe)', in: BA-MA, RW 19/744.

15 Nuremberg Military Tribunal, *Trials of War Criminals before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals under Control Council Law No. 10*, vol. XII, 'The Ministries Case', Nuremberg, October 1946 — April 1949 (Washington 1949–54), 1318.

16 KTB Wi Rü Amt, entry for 30 January 1941, BA-MA, RW 19/164. Cf. Arnold, *Besatzungspolitik*, op. cit., 80f.

17 'Wirtschaftspolitische Richtlinien der Gruppe Landwirtschaft', 23 May 1941, in *IMT*, vol. 36, 135–57 (Nbg.Dok. EC 126). See also Gerlach, *Morde*, op. cit., 44–59.

18 *Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht (Wehrmachtführungsstab), 1940–1945*, ed. Percy Ernst Schramm, 8 vols (Frankfurt am Main 1961–5, repr. Munich 1982), vol. 1, 342 (3 March 1941).

19 'Denkschrift des Wi Rü Amt über "Die wehrwirtschaftlichen Auswirkungen einer Operation im Osten"', 13 February 1941, in Thomas, *Geschichte*, op. cit., 514–32.

20 For an assessment of the memorandum, cf. Gert C. Lübbens, "'Ausnutzung oder Ausschachtung?' Zur Genese der deutschen Wirtschaftsplanungen für das Unternehmen "Barbarossa"', in Timm C. Richter (ed.), *Krieg und Verbrechen. Situation und Intention: Fallbeispiele* (Munich 2006), 173–83.

21 Anna Bramwell, *Blood and Soil: Richard Walther Darré and Hitler's 'Green Party'* (Abbotbrook 1985), 124.

For the time being, therefore, collaboration between the War Economy and Armaments Office and Staatssekretär Backe took place only with regard to organizational questions. On 12 March Backe endorsed the incorporation of agriculture into the planned Economic Staff.²² At the end of March, after lengthy negotiations, he agreed that under the military aegis of the Economic Staff East there should be a three-way division into specialized groups, extending to the lowest departmental levels.²³ Accordingly, a Chief Group La (*Landwirtschaft*, or agriculture) was established within the economic organization. This group, headed by Ministerialdirektor Hans-Joachim Riecke from the Reich Ministry of Food, was given the responsibility of supervising food policy in the occupied Soviet regions. However, in order to avoid the customary duplication between the military and civil departments with regard to war-economy tasks, the Planning Staff 'Oldenburg' set up by Thomas decided on 7 March to establish an Economic Command Staff East. This staff was directly responsible to Göring and, as Thomas envisaged it, would be directed by himself, Thomas, personally. In addition to the departmental heads from the War Economy and Armaments Office, the Economic Command Staff brought together all key representatives of the central authorities in Berlin.²⁴ By and large, the Staatssekretäre who were already members of the General Council of the Four-Year Plan now became the founding members of the Economic Command Staff East.²⁵ In addition to General Thomas they comprised the Staatssekretäre Backe (Reich Ministry of Food) and Alpers (Reich Forestry Office), the Unterstaatssekretär General von Hanneken (Reich Economics Ministry) and Staatssekretär Körner,²⁶ who, as a personal confidant of Göring's, had been the director of the Four-Year Plan since 1936. Körner now assumed the equivalent function within the Economic Command Staff. Except in the case of top-level sessions under Göring's chairmanship, Körner was in charge at meetings ('B-meetings'). In practice, the Economic Command Staff East gradually expanded, as departments with an interest in the 'eastern questions' increasingly became involved. The Economic Command Staff East was the forum within which the economic policies favoured by the specialist representatives were debated; its conclusions were passed on to the Economic Staff East for implementation.

22 KTB Wi Rü Amt/Stab, entry for 12 March 1941, BA-MA, RW 19/164.

23 Stab Ia, 'Aktentnotiz über Besprechung am 31.3.1941', 2 April 1941, BA-MA, RW 19/165. Those taking part in the negotiations included Thomas, Schubert, Backe, Ministerialdirektor Riecke, General von Hanneken and Ministerialrat Gramsch (for Göring). Agreement was reached 'after a long discussion of the pros and cons', a phrase which suggests that there had been conflicting views.

24 Composition taken from 'Oldenburg' documents (OKW/Wi Amt Z I/II), BA-MA, RW 31/80, p. 2.

25 Roswitha Czollek and Dietrich Eichholtz, 'Zur wirtschaftspolitischen Konzeption des deutschen Imperialismus beim Überfall auf die Sowjetunion', in *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 1968, 141–81, esp. 148.

26 'Vortrag des Chef Wi Rü Amt beim Reichsmarschall am 19.3.41', Berlin, 20 March 1941 (Nbg.Dok. PS 1156); Kay, 'Staatssekretäre', op. cit., 691.

In particular, the so-called ‘Green File’, the ‘Guidelines for Economic Command in Future Occupied Territories’,²⁷ was drawn up with the participation of all departments. The materials on which it was based were derived from the ministries and the Staatssekretäre,²⁸ the War Economy and Armaments Office taking charge of the file’s compilation. The document therefore included Backe’s ideas, though it was not as radical as the ‘Economic Policy Guidelines’ of the Chief Group La of 23 May 1941. Differences over the conduct of economic policy arose soon after Planning Staff ‘Oldenburg’ began work.²⁹ Following its inaugural meeting on 27 March 1941, Thomas raised the question whether the policy in the regions about to be occupied should be one of ‘exploitation or cannibalization’ (*Ausnutzung oder Ausschachtung*)³⁰ of the economic potential. This was an allusion to what had happened in the occupation of Poland: Hitler’s original plan had been completely to ‘impoverish’ Poland and turn the country into a heap of rubble,³¹ whereas the War Economy Staff had always been anxious to take over working production plant.³²

At a meeting in the War Economy and Armaments Office on 29 April 1941, held to discuss progress on the groundwork for the economic organization, it was reported that allocation of staff for the food section was only partly under way and that provision of staff by the Reich Economics Ministry was behind schedule. As there was no time to lose, Thomas proposed immediately to invite Staatssekretär Backe and Unterstaatssekretär General von Hanneken — who was under instructions from Göring to ‘identify the best personnel in the economy’³³ — to discuss the matter.³⁴ On top of the original reason for the convening of the meeting of 2 May, it emerged in the course of this 29 April meeting that further work on the assembly of the ‘Green File’ was being hampered by ‘uncertainty as to the form of exploitation which the Führer will order for the new areas’. It was noted that the draft of an order of the Führer

27 ‘Richtlinien für die Führung der Wirtschaft’ [‘Grüne Mappe’], part I, ‘Aufgaben und Organisation’ [Tasks and organization], Berlin, June 1941, BA-MA, RW 31/128.

28 ‘Vortragsnotiz über die Besprechung betr. Vorbereitungen Barbarossa am 29.4.1941’, 30 April 1941, signed Thomas, BA-MA, RW 19/739, fol. 299f. Cf. also ‘Niederschrift zur Sitzung des Wirtschaftsführungsstabes Ost unter Vorsitz von Staatssekretär Körner’, 26 May 1941, *ibid.*, fols 130–7.

29 By order OKW/Wi Rü Amt/Stab Ia, 25.3.1941, Colonel Nagel had to arrange the ‘Green File’, compilation from ‘Oldenburg’ documents, 25 March 1941, BA-MA, RW 31/80.

30 WiRüAmt/Stab, Ia, ‘Aktennotiz über im Führungsstab zu klärende Fragen’, 28 March 1941 (Nbg.Dok. PS 1313). Cf. Lübbers, “‘Ausnutzung oder Ausschachtung?’”, *op. cit.*

31 ‘Abteilungsleitersitzung bei Hans Frank am 19.1.1940’, in: Wolfgang Jacobmeyer and Werner Präg (eds), *Das Dienstagebuch des deutschen Generalgouverneurs in Polen 1939–1945* (Stuttgart 1975), 91f.

32 Cf. Hans Umbreit, *Deutsche Militärverwaltungen 1938/39. Die militärische Besetzung der Tschechoslowakei und Polens* (Stuttgart 1977), 224.

33 ‘Vortrag des Chef Wi Rü Amt beim Reichsmarschall am 19.3.41’, Berlin, 20 March 1941 (Nbg.Dok. PS 1156).

34 Stab Ia, ‘Vortragsnotiz über die Besprechung betr. Vorbereitungen Barbarossa am 29.4.1941’, signed Thomas, BA-MA, RW 19/739, fol. 299.

to Göring that had been shown to the Reich Marshal contained all the details but had not yet been signed.³⁵ There was therefore a need for clarification — as is clear from a memorandum prepared for the 2 May meeting, which Kay incorrectly describes as a second surviving set of minutes of the meeting's proceedings.³⁶ According to this memorandum, Hitler's directive to Göring (awaiting signature), as well as a note by Göring to the Commander-in-Chief of the army (which would inform the latter of the establishment of the Economic Command Staff East), needed to be discussed. Other questions also remained to be resolved: how the land between the main transit roads was to be secured and the provision of uniforms for the civilian 'special leaders'.

In actuality, the minutes of the meeting of 2 May 1941 deal in fully concrete terms with only one of these points: the exploitation of the newly acquired territory. The fact that there are no further details concerning the discussion points that Thomas had originally envisaged testifies to the drastic turn of events that occurred at the 2 May meeting. One of the participants, Staatssekretär Backe, used the occasion to demand that the economic policy should have radical objectives. He called for the occupied Soviet territories to be plundered, if necessary at the cost of deaths running into millions. This demand could have been made only under Hitler's instructions. In making it, Backe lifted the lid on the secret planning that had been taking place and on Hitler's decision that millions of deaths were an acceptable price to pay for the acquisition of maximum 'surpluses' — ideas which until then had had only the status of a rumour. The minutes record Backe's demands as the 'result' of the meeting: it does not represent a 'decision' taken by those who were there. Alex J. Kay, however, takes the document as evidence of a shared intention to commit mass murder on the part of the leading political *and military* figures present. They did not merely approve Backe's objectives, he says, but received them with 'enthusiasm'.³⁷ Kay's sweeping claim is based not on concrete items of evidence but solely on the supposed confirmation recorded in the document and the implied agreement on the part of all the participants that the German troops should be supplied exclusively from the occupied areas. The fact that troops had been supplied 'off the land' in earlier campaigns³⁸ is adduced to

35 Ibid.

36 [Wi Rü Amt] Stab Ia, 'Besprechung Staatssekretäre 2.5.41', BA-MA, RW 19/739, fol. 306. Kay cites both documents in full and in immediate succession, under the false assumption that each document is a set of minutes: 'The minutes of this gathering . . . have survived in two parts' (Kay, 'Staatssekretäre', op. cit., 685); 'The second, and far less striking, part of the minutes' (ibid., p. 687). Gerlach (*Morde*, op. cit., 47) at least speaks of a demand by Thomas and characterizes the document as a memorandum for the meeting.

37 Kay, 'Staatssekretäre', op. cit., 697.

38 According to the Hague Land Warfare Convention of 1907 it was permissible to supply troops from occupied territories provided that such supplies were 'in proportion to the resources of the country'. On the policy of exploitation, cf. Hans Umbreit, 'Auf dem Weg zur Kontinentalherrschaft', in *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. 5/1, *Organisation und Mobilisierung des deutschen Machtbereichs* (Stuttgart 1988), 3–345, esp. 216–43.

prove that those present knew about, and agreed to, the policy of mass murder of millions of civilians.³⁹

A further reason why the record of the meeting takes the form it does is that no agreement was reached concerning the 'directive of the Führer' to Göring that was up for discussion on 2 May.⁴⁰ The draft of the directive was never in fact signed, and no corresponding order was issued either by Göring⁴¹ or by Hitler before the invasion. It was plainly understood that circulating instructions to the huge number of departments involved would create enormous problems of secrecy and also generate resistance within the Wehrmacht. Despite the considerable agreement that existed between Hitler and the Wehrmacht top brass on aspects of the campaign, one cannot fail to notice that Hitler was aware of the unease that senior generals felt about criminal orders and was not confident that the military would act with the rigour he required. For that reason he not only gave Himmler's SS the responsibility for securing the occupied territories but also put Göring and Backe, rather than the Wehrmacht, in charge of exploiting them economically.⁴² There was accordingly no need for a representative of the Army High Command (Oberkommando des Heeres, OKH) to have been invited to the 2 May meeting. Alex J. Kay seeks to account for this 'surprising absentee' by arguing that 'there is no way of being absolutely certain who did and did not attend'.⁴³ However, the OKH took no part in work on the 'Green File', nor did any OKH representative attend meetings of the Economic Command Staff. Rather, the Economic Staff East had the task of implementing the instructions of the Economic Command Staff and, if necessary, presenting them to the army Quartermaster-General, who in turn

39 Kay criticizes, *inter alia*, the conclusions of Klaus Jochen Arnold: without giving concrete items of evidence: 'Arnold disputes the existence of a fixed programme, largely exonerates Thomas (in fact one of the main exponents of the strategy), questions not only the agreement of the Wehrmacht leadership but also its awareness of such intentions' (Kay, 'Staatssekretäre', op. cit., 699). His critique is already partly disproved here. For the view that the Wehrmacht was unaware of an approved plan, preceding the 22 June 1941 invasion, for the starvation of millions, cf. Arnold, *Besatzungspolitik*, op. cit., 96 and 245–67.

40 Cf. the draft in Rolf-Dieter Müller, 'Industrielle Interessenpolitik im Rahmen des "Generalplans Ost"'. Dokumente zum Einfluß von Wehrmacht, Industrie und SS auf die wirtschaftspolitische Zielsetzung für Hitlers Ostimperium', in *MGM* 29 (1981), 101–41, esp. 117f.; also Rolf-Dieter Müller, 'Von der Wirtschaftsallianz zum kolonialen Ausbeutungskrieg', in *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main 1991), 141–245, esp. 187f.

41 See Göring's order of 27 July 1941, Bundesarchiv Berlin (hereafter BAArch), R 26 I/13, fol. 1f.

42 The army was not to be 'burdened' with administration: cf. *KTB Halder*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart 1963), 303 (5 March 1941). Hitler thought that the generals 'are, for the most part, not able to deal with and solve political questions in a watertight way . . . When the going gets tough, you have to preserve your own life, and in the last resort anyone who isn't ready to apply stiff penalties will have either to capitulate or to wade through blood' (Joseph Goebbels, *Die Tagebücher. Sämtliche Fragmente*, ed. Elke Fröhlich for the Institut für Zeitgeschichte, vol. 2/1 (Munich/New York/London/Paris 1996), 272 (19 August 1941). With regard to the murder of Jews, Hitler let it be known through an adjutant that 'the soldier should not be burdened with these political questions; what was involved here was a necessary reparcelling of land' (Heeresgruppe Nord/Ia, *KTB*, 3.7.1941, BA-MA, RH 19 III/767, fol. 52).

43 Kay, 'Staatssekretäre', op. cit., 696–7.

had to pass them on to the troops in the form of orders. Moreover, despite the fact that Backe's objectives and those of the designated Reich Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories, Alfred Rosenberg, were partly identical,⁴⁴ the latter was likewise not granted any influence over economic management. This was the responsibility solely of the Four-Year Plan organization, which used military structures in implementing its objectives within the army's sphere of operations.⁴⁵ In this connection, Kay's statement that the planners were not clear how the 'starvation policy' (or 'concept') was to be carried out in practice is a bewildering one.⁴⁶ The Chief Group La's 'Guidelines' of 23 May and the discussions concerning the implementation of a radical policy of exploitation conducted in July 1941 show plainly the contrast between the goals, on the one hand, of Staatssekretär Backe and, on the other, of the War Economy and Armaments Office and, indeed, of the armed forces.⁴⁷

What really concerned General Thomas about Backe's demands of 2 May is apparent from a memorandum of 5 May.⁴⁸ He once again queried the absence of the directive of the Führer and emphasized four points: supplies for the fighting troops; exploitation of agriculture, through the increased production of vegetable oil and grain; industrial exploitation, through the increased production of mineral oil and support for production of coal and raw materials in short supply; and development of transport. He was particularly anxious to increase production in the industrial and agricultural sectors and avoid the reckless cannibalization of the occupied lands. Accordingly, he took the view that a limited transfer of armament work, confined to so-called 'bottle-neck' products to be produced industrially, should be carried out as a *temporary* measure.⁴⁹ In the longer run other requirements would emerge in any case, as had been demonstrated in the Polish and western campaigns of 1939 and 1940. In the case of the Generalgouvernement, the Wehrmacht had previously urged that 'all important production facilities should be put into operation

44 'Wirtschaftspolitische Richtlinien', 23 May 1941, IMT, vol. 36, 140.

45 Lübbers, "'Ausnutzung oder Ausschachtung?'"', op. cit., 180. On thinking with regard to eastern policy within Rosenberg's ministry, cf. Andreas Zellhuber, *'Unsere Verwaltung treibt einer Katastrophe zu . . .'* Das Reichsministerium für die besetzten Ostgebiete und die deutsche Besatzungsherrschaft in der Sowjetunion 1941–1945 (Stamsried 2006).

46 Cf. Kay, 'Staatssekretäre', op. cit., 699.

47 Rates of starvation for the population and for prisoners of war could have been established before the campaign. Christian Streit's thesis that those responsible deliberately neglected to make preparations for supplying provisions to prisoners of war, with the result that they would starve to death (cf. Kay, 'Staatssekretäre', op. cit., 700), can be regarded as disproved. Kay gives no new evidence for such a 'consensus'. See Rolf Keller and Reinhard Otto, 'Das Massensterben der sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen und die Wehrmachtbürokratie. Unterlagen zur Registrierung der sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen 1941–1945 in deutschen und russischen Institutionen', in *MGM* 57 (1998), 149–80.

48 'Fragen, die durch den Reichsmarschall noch befohlen bzw. beim Führer geklärt werden müssen', 5 May 1941, BA-MA, RW 19/739 (Nbg.Dok. PS 1314); extracts in Müller, 'Interessenpolitik', document no. 4, 118.

49 Ibid.

as rapidly as possible, in order to exploit the land for the German war economy'.⁵⁰

The minutes of the 2 May meeting likewise make no mention of Göring's letter to the Commander-in-Chief of the army regarding the establishment of the Economic Command Staff East, which Thomas had included on the agenda for 2 May. This is interesting, as the 29 April draft of this letter says that Thomas was to remain 'in charge' of the Economic Command Staff. According to a handwritten alteration, however, Staatssekretär Paul Körner was now to head the Staff, while Thomas was to become an ordinary member of the Command Staff on a par with the other members, below the Staatssekretäre.⁵¹ From Göring's point of view this was logical, as Körner was already head of the General Council of the Four-Year Plan, where he exercised the same role in his capacity as Göring's regular representative and confidant.⁵² On this point, in other words, there was a conflict of view on 2 May and Thomas was forced to accept a significant weakening of his position. Admittedly, in an order of 8 May 1941 Thomas still described himself as 'in charge' of the Command Staff East,⁵³ but the description had ceased to conform to the reality. The only person who, in Göring's absence,⁵⁴ fitted the description on 2 May 1941 was Staatssekretär Körner, a fact which plausibly explains his presence at this meeting. Kay's claim that Thomas had 'overall operational control' over the Economic Command Staff East⁵⁵ is simply incorrect. The new version of the letter to the army Commander-in-Chief, Field Marshal von Brauchitsch, was sent on 14 May at the latest.⁵⁶

A key component of Alex J. Kay's argument is the supposedly large number of participants at the meeting of 2 May 1941, in which only Staatssekretäre from the Economic Command Staff East could in fact have been involved.⁵⁷ Since the minutes refer to a 'meeting with the Staatssekretäre', researchers, including Kay, have assumed that many of the Staatssekretäre from the Economic Command Staff East were in attendance. In support of this assumption Kay cites later sessions of the Economic Command Staff and uses the attendance lists from those sessions to suggest the names of various people who might have been present. This is a questionable procedure, as the 2 May

50 Cf. also Müller, 'Interessenpolitik', 105.

51 Draft of 29 April 1941 in BA-MA, RW 19/739, fol. 70f. The alterations are contained in a fair copy of the draft (copy of the original) of 29 April 1941: Abschrift zu VP 7191/41g.Rs (Nbg.Dok. EC 3). Cf. also Müller, 'Wirtschaftsallianz', op. cit., 174.

52 For the similarity of Körner's activities and influence on the General Council of the Four-Year Plan, see affidavit of Friedrich Gramsch, 19 November 1947 (Nbg.Dok. NID 13351).

53 OKW/Wi Rü Amt, Stab Ia, 42/41g.K., Betr.: 'Arbeitsstab zbV', 8 May 1941, BA-MA, RW 31/80.

54 Kay, 'Staatssekretäre', op. cit., 693f.

55 Ibid., 690. Gerlach, *Morde*, op. cit., 143 mentions the fact that Thomas had been already supplanted as organizer in April 1941.

56 Kay, 'Staatssekretäre', op. cit., 694 mentions this fact, but does not refer to the alterations to the draft.

57 Ibid., 691.

meeting is not described, in the record, as a session of the Command Staff East. We do not know which members may have been added to the Command Staff by 2 May.⁵⁸ Kay also picks up and tries to verify earlier claims that General Jodl and Rosenberg may have taken part,⁵⁹ but although these claims are central to his article as well, the evidence for them is far from convincing.

General Thomas, who was present with staff officers, invited *Staatssekretäre* Hanneken and Backe, and their attendance may be taken as proven. General Schubert, the head of the Economic Staff East, was present by virtue of his function. What, however, of Alfred Rosenberg, the designated Reich Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories? On 29 April 1941 Rosenberg met Field Marshal Keitel to be briefed on the Wehrmacht's plans for 'Operation Barbarossa'.⁶⁰ Keitel promised Rosenberg a meeting with General Thomas, who was evidently to brief him about the economic organization. The next day, however, Keitel asked Rosenberg whether he 'could receive [Thomas], together with *Staatssekretär* Körner, on Friday [= 2 May]'.⁶¹ Two points need to be borne in mind. First, a meeting of the *Staatssekretäre* would never have taken place in Rosenberg's department, so his participation, posited by Kay, was never even planned.⁶² For the proposed briefing of Rosenberg, only those in charge needed to attend. Accordingly — and this is the second point — Rosenberg was to have a consultation with *Staatssekretär* Körner, who in the meanwhile had assumed the lead role below Göring on the Economic Command Staff. This meeting did indeed take place — but not until 3 May, according to Rosenberg's records.⁶³ Kay maintains, however, that Rosenberg was present on 2 May, 'although . . . it would be rather presumptuous' that the entry in Rosenberg's diary was an error and nevertheless this 'does not seem very probable'.⁶⁴ In support of this view he cites a note of 30 April, in which Rosenberg asks '[the] General in an urgent matter to a discussion on 2.5.41, [at] 11 o'clock in the morning in the office of the Reichsleiter [= Rosenberg]'. Kay identifies the general in question as General Thomas.⁶⁵ In fact, however, it was General Jodl, the Chief of the Operations Staff of the OKW.⁶⁶

58 The earliest surviving transcript (also cited by Kay) records the proceedings of the fourth session, on 26 May 1941: loc. cit.

59 Ibid., p. 692.

60 Rosenberg's diary entry for 1 May 1941, published in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, no. 140, 22 June 1971; KTB OKW, vol. 1, 390.

61 Rosenberg's diary entry for 1 May 1941.

62 Kay, 'Staatssekretäre', op. cit., 692.

63 Rosenberg's diary entry for 6 May 1941.

64 For 'error on Rosenberg's part' see Kay, 'Staatssekretäre', 693. On the other hand, Kay argues on the presence of Rosenberg at the meeting: 'If Rosenberg was present at the meeting', his 'diary entries appear to contradict'; moreover 'it is unlikely' that Rosenberg met Thomas and Körner separately, 692; Rosenberg (and others) were 'very probable participants', 694; 'The presence of . . . the designated East Minister himself, was due to its responsibility for civil administration in the occupied East', 696; 'those present at the meeting on 2 May (which included . . . the future chief of the civil administration in the occupied Soviet territories)', 699.

65 Ibid., 691.

66 This is already stated in Gerlach, *Morde*, op. cit., 46, fn. 61.

On 30 April Rosenberg, at Keitel's instigation, had a brief meeting with the head of the Land Defence (*Landesverteidigung*) department within the OKW, Major-General Warlimont.⁶⁷ The latter spoke about the powers that were to be given to the Wehrmacht commanders in the territories that would be placed under civil administration. For Rosenberg, these powers were too wide; he argued that orders affecting political matters should be issued only with his consent. Keitel, however, believed that this principle was 'not acceptable'.⁶⁸ Rosenberg viewed the matter as highly important, and at the Planning Staff 'Oldenburg' he called off the planned meeting on 2 May with Körner and Thomas and informed Department IV of the Wehrmacht Operations Staff that he would be expecting General Jodl in his department on the morning of 2 May; that same afternoon, he said, he had to give a presentation to Hitler.⁶⁹ On 1 May, accordingly, Warlimont hastily assembled the papers for the meeting with Rosenberg, and it was recorded in a note that orders issued by the commander of the Wehrmacht should take precedence over 'all other orders, including those issued by the political plenipotentiary'.⁷⁰ This meeting — at which Rosenberg was informed about the demarcation of the area of operations on the basis of the 'guidelines on special areas' specified in directive no. 21, about the agreement reached between the army Quartermaster-General and the Reichsführer SS on the role of the security police, and about the tasks of the Wehrmacht commanders — did indeed take place on 2 May.⁷¹ This proves, apart from anything else, that Jodl could not have been present at the notorious 2 May meeting. Afterwards Rosenberg went on to his lengthy talk with Hitler⁷² and did not meet Thomas and Körner till the following day, 3 May 1941.⁷³ In other words, neither Rosenberg nor Jodl was present at the meeting with the Staatssekretäre, and speculation to this effect rests on selective interpretation of the surviving sources.

One has to ask whether sufficient attention has been paid here to what is known about power relations within the Third Reich and the circumstances

67 KTB OKW, vol. 1, 390 (30 April 1941).

68 Cf. the draft for an 'Erlaß des Führers über die Ernennung von Wehrmachtbefehlshabern in den neu besetzten Ostgebieten', in BArch, R 6/269, fol. 68f, including Rosenberg's comments, and Keitel's objections (*ibid.*, fol. 70). This draft of the 'decree of the Führer' with Rosenberg's and Keitel's comments is also included in a note by Lammers to Keitel of 20 May 1941: cf. Nbg.Dok. PS 1188.

69 Note of 30 April 1941, BArch, R 6/269, fol. 71. This note is also preserved in the documents of the Wehrmacht Operations Staff, BA-MA, RW 4/759.

70 Abt. Landesverteidigung, 'Besprechung beim Reichsleiter Rosenberg, 1.5.1941' (Nbg.Dok. 1188).

71 KTB OKW, vol. 1, 390 (2 May 1941). Cf. Jürgen Förster, 'Das Unternehmen "Barbarossa" als Eroberungs- und Vernichtungskrieg', in *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main 1991), 498–538, esp. 505.

72 Rosenberg's diary entry for 6 May 1941.

73 Kay argues that Rosenberg was present on 2 May although he assumes at the same time that the relevant entry in Rosenberg's diary for 3 May could not be an error (Kay, 'Staatssekretäre', *op. cit.*, 691ff). In his book Kay states: 'The probability that this was a reference to a second meeting with Körner and Thomas . . . is not very high': Kay, *Exploitation*, *op. cit.*, 126.

under which important documents were produced. In seeking to compare the meeting of 2 May with the Wannsee conference of 20 January 1942, Alex J. Kay offers superficial hints, not illuminating evidence.⁷⁴ Some of the documents he cites are misdescribed. Although he says it is wrong to speculate whether mass murder was ‘structurally’ built into the policies of the Third Reich before the summer of 1941, he nevertheless claims that such speculation is plausible, despite the lack of evidence.⁷⁵ Moreover, even if a comparison between the two meetings is made in Kay’s own terms, a significant difference immediately becomes apparent: namely, that whereas, according to his argument, the Wehrmacht played a key part in the meeting of 2 May 1941, no representative of the Wehrmacht was present at the Wannsee conference. Indeed, there are several instances in his article where mutually incompatible positions are adopted — a sign that attempts are being made to force recalcitrant data under the umbrella of a supposedly self-consistent thesis. Like other scholars before him, Kay overestimates the scope of General Thomas’s authority during this period. Not only, however, were no votes taken on Hitler’s basic decisions; no form of agreement on the part of his subordinates was required. The task of subordinates was to interpret and implement what had been prescribed, and to co-ordinate the efforts of those involved.⁷⁶ The few bare lines that have survived as a record of the meeting of 2 May 1941 do not show that there was ‘wide-ranging agreement’⁷⁷ to a deliberate policy of mass murder of millions of people, particularly since any reference to what Kay takes to be the ‘target group’ (the *Staatssekretäre*) is conspicuous by its absence. To construe the discussion about the ‘needs of war’, which were the central focus of preparations, as a precautionary exculpatory strategy designed to conceal the racist drive towards mass murder is not adequate.⁷⁸

In recent years debates among historians of the Third Reich have been less about facts and more about interpretations, the latter often diametrically opposed to one another. Disagreements have reflected the points of view that scholars have adopted towards their subject-matter — the premises with regard to which they categorize and evaluate their data. With the shift in focus

74 Kay, ‘*Staatssekretäre*’, op. cit., 688–9, 695–8.

75 He rejects speculation by appeal to an argument which he himself has not taken into account in his interpretation of the 2 May 1941 meeting: ‘However, one must be careful about drawing conclusions where there is no evidence that the nazis themselves drew the same conclusions’, Kay, ‘*Staatssekretäre*’, op. cit., 698.

76 On the one hand, Kay says that the ‘starvation policy’ had already been sanctioned by Hitler before the meeting of 2 May 1941 and, moreover, that all those involved, including Keitel and the army Quartermaster-General Eduard Wagner, also signalled their agreement, in the months before the invasion, to mass deaths from starvation (ibid., 699). On the other hand, he emphasizes the importance of the 2 May meeting and the ‘endorsement’ voiced by the participants on the occasion of the meeting (ibid., 697).

77 Kay, *Exploitation*, op. cit., 126–33; Kay, ‘*Staatssekretäre*’, op. cit., 699.

78 ‘Of course, racist attitudes . . . were decisive in shaping the preparations for both the war itself and the subsequent occupation’ (Kay, *Exploitation*, op. cit., 121). Distinctions are blurred, too, by references to ‘Nazis’, ‘leading officials’ and ‘Nazi policies’.

to the role of 'National Socialist ideology', the realities of war and dictatorship and the complex causes and motives that led to the National Socialist policy of mass murder have slipped into the background. What is crucially needed in the study of the role of the Wehrmacht in the Third Reich, however, is not all-embracing theories but accounts of complex contexts and processes of development. This is the only way in which a balanced assessment of these events can be made.

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