The arrival of this new examination of agricultural policies under the Hitler regime is welcome on at least three distinct grounds. First, both its authors are well-seasoned practitioners in this area of research, and second, now enjoy the opportunity to incorporate the latest findings of local and regional studies into their work. Third, the various analyses of the NSDAP’s electorate now available enable us to appreciate somewhat better the role played by the peasantry in supporting the movement, as National Socialists harnessed the long-standing grievances of the farmers to drive themselves forward politically. As Gies and Corni see it: ‘Thus the NSDAP became not only the first real people’s party in German history, but also by far the strongest farmers’ party that had ever existed’ (p. 588). Once such electoral momentum has been analysed, the authors devote the remainder of the book to an evaluation of Blut und Boden ideology in practice. This entails an examination of how well National Socialist agrarian structures served the needs of both the peasantry and the nation as a whole.

In advance of any critique of their assessment a little has to be said about how the book has been put together. Most sections have been individually composed by one author, whilst the introduction, the summaries of each chapter and the overall résumé have been jointly written. There is little noticeable difference in style, and the quality of research and analysis is uniformly of a high standard.

Not surprisingly, Gies is responsible for the initial two chapters on the historical background prior to the NSDAP’s accession to power, and on the origins and organization of the food and farming corporation which ensued from Gleichschaltung on the land. The head of the Party’s Agrarian Office, Richard Walther Darré, soon emerged both as Reichsbauernführer and as Minister of Food and Agriculture. On his shoulders lay the ultimate responsibility for the new organization, the Reichsnährstand (RNS). Since it embraced not merely farmers but also all aspects of food distribution and marketing, the title was misleading; as Gies emphasizes, the corporation really should be termed a Kartell and not a Stand. Even Max Frauendorfer, the NSDAP’s chief corporatist pundit, conceded that Stand essentially meant a common way of life for its members. In his view, therefore, it was quite clear to farmers ‘that
this common way of life must come to an end with the farm’ (p. 87). In other words, an organization containing various professions could not be designated a Stand.

Of course, the main issue for Gies lies in the efficiency or otherwise of the new corporation, rather than in its title. He clearly finds it bureaucratic and over-centralized, as well as plagued by conflict between old Party members and agrarian technocrats within its ranks. Bureaucracy and empire building are not, however, confined to the Third Reich, and that particular aspect of the RNS tells us rather less about Hitler’s Germany than the author imagines. Gies is surely on firmer ground in his analysis of how the regime’s rejection of both a command economy and of the ethics of supply and demand made the task of the RNS so difficult in practice. The ‘Middle Way’ devised by the corporation centred around the necessity of avoiding the unacceptable price fluctuations of a liberal system whilst spurning sovietization. The solution lay in the use of fixed prices.

“Fixed price” was understood to mean tied and stable prices, whose stability was guaranteed by the authority of the state’ (p. 335). The point of departure was the perceived requirement of offering a fair income to producers without unduly burdening the consumers. Stable prices to farmers represented one track in the strategy; the other resulted from a reduction of the difference between what the producer received and what the consumer paid in the shops for the same produce. This latter aim could be achieved by cutting out excess middlemen, or in RNS terminology, ‘unnötige Zwischenmitglieder und unzuverlässige Elemente’ (p. 352).

The authors are convinced that the bold attempt to find an option excluding liberalism and Marxism simultaneously did not work. In practice it soon became virtually impossible to please both farmers and the general public, especially as from 1936 the rearmament programme demanded that fixed prices to the producer should be held at existing levels, to obviate inflation. Ironically the organ which Darré had envisaged principally as a means of saving the peasantry probably served consumers somewhat better, and certainly proved of great help to central dictatorship.

This assistance arose from the fundamental nature of the RNS, which the authors insist never represented the organ of self-government for agriculture which the regime claimed it to be. Rather, Gies and Corni interpret Darré’s creation as first and foremost an instrument of
national policy, which sought to preserve the agrarian sector for a whole complex web of social, economic, and political reasons. Although this book rejects the simplistic Stamokap view of the RNS merely as a way of preparing for war (since other factors lay behind its foundation), the authors do stress that in wartime National Socialist agrarian administration did actually function well. In their opinion, the maintenance of civilian morale and the continued faith that the public showed in the regime owed at least something to the presence of reasonable food supplies during hostilities. What is almost the final sentence here runs: ‘By comparison with the First World War, too, food supplies in Germany between 1939 and 1945 were much better’ (p. 588).

The NSDAP might well have claimed that in this fact lay the justification of their agricultural policy; the trauma of 1918, when food shortages contributed at least in part to German defeat, did not occur in 1945. Morally this could be classified as a negative virtue since it enabled Hitler to execute aggressive war. Moreover, there are factual reservations as well, which the authors do underline. The most obvious concerns the German opportunity of exploiting the resources of occupied Europe, on which the book is informative. According to its citation from Brandt (p. 554), imports and requisitions from abroad yielded some 13 million tons of the foodstuffs consumed in Germany during hostilities, from a grand total of 95 million tons. True, the Third Reich did acquire a very large number of additional mouths to feed in wartime, whether as foreign workers or as prisoners of war. None the less there must have been a net gain in food resources after 1939.

Any final judgement on how well the RNS performed is rendered even harder by the efforts made from 1936 to hold down consumption, the obvious alternative to higher output. Hence no doubt the choice of the title of this book. Did Germany pull through simply by compelling its citizens to eat less? Naturally the campaign to avoid waste (Kampf dem Verderb) did restrict consumption, but if ‘guns or butter’ were literally interpreted, Germans did have more of the latter available in 1939 than in 1932, according to statistics here. But elsewhere the authors make use of Richard Overy’s well-known thesis on German living-standards. He states that official policy lay more in the desire to establish a minimum level of nutrition than to maintain prosperity. As Overy himself summarized it: ‘This was to avoid at all costs another “turnip winter”’ (quoted on p. 572). This is, of course, a reference to the
shortages of 1917 in Germany. However, the authors’ citation from Overy is not entirely persuasive, as elsewhere here (p. 556) they point to a survey in 1937 of nutrition levels among 350 workers’ families; it showed a per capita daily consumption of 2,750 calories. Few experts would describe that as a minimum level. Moreover, rations in wartime did not fall below 2,000 calories daily for normal consumers (the lowest category) until autumn 1944, as Gies and Corni concede.

Even Goebbels’s famous allusion to a possible choice between guns and butter in a speech of January 1936 referred to a temporary shortage of fats at the time. It has to be treated with some caution in any debate on pre-war living-standards. To what extent, therefore, the RNS owed its success to limitations on nutrition levels is likely to remain unresolved; but this research does not appear to support the notion that Germans really had to tighten their belts in peacetime.

Naturally the war did pose considerable problems in respect of food supplies. In particular, the Allied bombing campaign disrupted distribution just as increasing military setbacks deprived Germany of outside food resources. Under such circumstances domestic output and the maintenance of farm discipline took on greater significance. Despite appeals by the regime to remind the peasantry of its duty, however, the evasion of regulations did become ever more common, and a Black Market slowly developed. Interestingly, Hitler turned a blind eye to minor infringements, in order not to upset either producers or the public. Increases in the practice of Hamstern (illegal food hoarding and bartering) went largely unpunished. Once peasants began to falsify statistics on how much fodder they were growing in order to understate the size of their livestock herds, the supply of bread grain to urban areas became more endangered. In sum, rural discipline slackened, yet no serious nutritional crisis occurred. The campaign begun in 1934 to maximize domestic output (Erzeugungsschlacht) bore fruit in wartime. Thus in spite of failing controls towards the end of hostilities, the RNS supervised the collection and distribution of foodstuffs with a reasonable degree of efficiency.

No work of this nature would be complete without an assessment of the relationship between Hitler and Darré, and of their respective views of the peasantry. Did the latter, who came late to the Party, really share his leader’s policies, including expansionist war, or did his endlessly repeated propaganda about Blut und Boden represent a different set of values? Gies and Corni stand firm in the belief that
‘Hitler saw agrarian policy exclusively from the perspective of power politics’ (p. 73). This suggests that he regarded the farming community as a means to an end, unlike Darré. There is little doubt in the authors’ minds that the dream of the Reichsbauernführer centred around the notion of a re-agrarianized Germany based on the peasantry. Darré seems to have felt, according to them, that a Germany of this kind could well serve as a model for all Europe. Nevertheless, Gies and Corni accept that the two men had some ideas in common, for example, on the Third Reich’s need for expansion. As evidence for Darré’s opinion on the matter they offer an analysis of a speech which he delivered in January 1939. The extract which they cite does not, however, seem to support such a conclusion. The thesis here that Blut und Boden could not be separated in practice from Hitler’s foreign policy may be considered doubtful.

Of course, there was a great deal of apparent similarity in the strategies of the two men. The RNS did serve expansionist interests in wartime, although that may well have been coincidental from Darré’s point of view. Certainly both saw the peasantry as the life source of the nation and as a barrier to Marxism. Hitler did sanction a special status for the RNS, which Gies and Corni admit he did not intend to use as a model for other sectors. In addition, although it is not discussed here, he exerted his influence to push through the law on hereditary farm entailment (the Erbfhofgesetz) in 1933, when the Cabinet was expressing doubts on its viability. Both men wished to preserve the peasantry by lifting it out of the capitalist economic order, but the thesis of Darré as an advocate of military expansion is harder to sustain. The authors are on safer ground in attributing his downfall in 1942 to his impracticality as an agrarian leader. They do not feel that political differences with Hitler played any part.

Apart from the thinness of the debate here on modernization under the Hitler regime, and the role which the Erbfhofgesetz might have played in the long run in that respect, this is an excellent and detailed study of its chosen theme. It is all the more regrettable that it is marred, both in the main text and in the footnotes, by a considerable number of misprints.

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