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Rolf Hobson

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ROLF HOBSON
PROFESSOR OF HISTORY
PROFESSEUR D'HISTOIRE
NORWEGIAN INSTITUTE OF DEFENCE STUDIES, OSLO
INSTITUT NORVÉGIEN D'ÉTUDES SUR LA DÉFENSE, OSLO
AHKR, UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN
AHKR, UNIVERSITÉ DE BERGEN
Rhobson@mil.no

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La Norvège, la Belgique et le grain soviétique 1940-1941

Abstract: Norway and Belgium were heavily dependent on grain imports. When the two countries were occupied by Germany in 1940, they were cut off from overseas supplies by the British blockade. Attempts to secure American relief through Herbert Hoover came to nothing. The only potential source of supply on the continent was the Soviet Union. In the spring of 1941, both countries sent trade delegations to Moscow. Soviet authorities were only willing to negotiate barter agreements which served the needs of their rearmament programme. No grain was delivered under the treaties because shortly after their conclusion Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa. For the rest of the war, the two occupied countries were supplied with grain through a system of plunder, whereby Germany starved the peoples of occupied Eastern Europe to feed the Wehrmacht, its own civilian population, and its allies.

Keywords: Second World War, Grain Imports, Belgium, Norway, Soviet Authorities, British Blockade, Nazi Germany, System of Plunder.

Résumé : La Norvège et la Belgique dépendaient fortement des importations de céréales. Lorsque les deux pays furent occupés par l'Allemagne en 1940, ils furent coupés des approvisionnements étrangers par le blocus britannique. Les tentatives pour obtenir une aide américaine par l'intermédiaire d'Herbert Hoover restèrent vaines. La seule source potentielle d'approvisionnement sur le continent était l'Union soviétique. Au printemps 1941, les deux pays envoyèrent des délégations commerciales à Moscou. Les autorités soviétiques n'étaient disposées à négocier que des accords de troc répondant aux besoins de leur programme de réarmement. Aucune livraison de céréales n'eut lieu dans le cadre de ces traités, car peu après leur conclusion, Hitler lança l'opération Barbarossa. Pendant le reste de la guerre, les deux pays occupés furent approvisionnés en céréales dans le cadre d'un système de pillage, par lequel l'Allemagne affamait les peuples de l'Europe de l'Est occupée pour nourrir la Wehrmacht, sa propre population civile et ses alliés.

Mots-clés : Seconde Guerre mondiale, importations de grain, Belgique, Norvège, autorités américaines, autorités soviétiques, blocus britannique, Allemagne nazie, système de pillage.

Demographically, Belgium and Norway are very different countries with differing economic histories. Yet during the Second World War their governments-in-exile and the ministerial bureaucracies they left behind faced a very similar dilemma. The populations of both countries had depended on overseas supplies of grain, which were now cut off from them due to the German occupation and the British blockade. They could not feed themselves, which made them the two most vulnerable countries on the continent in this respect.

In this dependence they resembled Britain, but Britain was a great power with the world's largest navy and empire. As long as it retained command of the sea, it could both feed its population and put pressure on the German war economy by depriving occupied Europe of food. Drawing on its experience of the British "hunger blockade" during the First World War, the Nazi regime sought to evade this pressure by expanding to the east and plundering its continental empire to ensure that the German population, at least, did not starve.¹ The occupied countries of Western Europe were ground between the millstones of the British blockade and the demands of the German *Grossraumwirtschaft*. Whether the occupied populations were to be fed or starved was determined by their economic usefulness to Germany and to their position in the Nazi racial hierarchy. The Greek famine of 1942 was a terrible illustration of what plunder and blockade could mean for a country dependent on wheat imports.

Where was the food to come from once the British blockade cut the continent off from overseas supplies? There was only one country in continental Europe with an exportable surplus of grain: the Soviet Union. (However, the word "surplus" is a misnomer for grain stocks, given that the first Five Year Plan had been extracted by force from a terrorized peasantry, which itself suffered the worst man-made famine in history in 1932-3).² During the period of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Soviet Union and Germany concluded two trade agreements under the terms of which raw materials, including grain, were exchanged for German industrial and military technology.³ After the German invasion

¹ Hans Erich Volkmann, "Landwirtschaft Und Ernährung in Hitlers Europa 1939-1945" (Agriculture and Food in Hitler's Europe 1939-1945), *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen (Military history reports)* 35/1 (1984); Gustavo Corni and Horst Gies, *Brot, Butter, Kanonen: Die Ernährungswirtschaft in Deutschland unter der Diktatur Hitlers (Bread, butter, cannons: The food industry in Germany under Hitler's dictatorship)* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997), 399-409; Lizzie Collingham, *The Taste of War: World War Two and the Battle for Food* (London: Penguin Books, 2012).

² Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010). For contrasting views on the role of exports as a cause of the hunger, see Viktor V. Kondrashin, *Golod 1932-1933 Godov: Tragediia Rossiiskoi Derevni (Hunger in 1932-1933: the tragedy of a Russian village)*, (Moscow: ROSSPEN: Rossiiskaia Politicheskaiia Entsiklopediia, vol. 69/2, 2008), 266-83, and N.N. Nazarenko and A.V. Bashkin, "Eksport zernovykh nacala 30-Kh Gg. XX V. v kontekste goloda 1932-1933 Gg.," *Noveishaia istoria Rossii (A New History of Russia)*, 17/3 (2016).

³ Heinrich Schwendemann, *Die wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit zwischen dem Deutschen Reich und der Sowjetunion von 1939 bis 1941: Alternative zu Hitlers Ostprogramm? (Economic cooperation between the German Reich and the Soviet Union from 1939 to 1941: an alternative to Hitler's Ostprogramm?)* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1993); Grigorij N. Sevostjanov, *Moskva - Berlin. Politika i diplomatija Kremlja 1920 - 1941; sbornik dokumentov (Moscow-Berlin. Kremlin policy and diplomacy 1920-1941. Collection of documents)* vol. 3 (Moscow: Nauka, 2011).

in June 1941, the Nazi leadership planned to make its empire “blockadefest” by plundering the agricultural resources of Ukraine, meanwhile starving northwest Russia’s urban population, which numbered in the tens of millions. Over the following years, grain deliveries to Germany never matched expectations, chiefly because the Wehrmacht was expected to live off the land it fought over, but they were sufficient to top up Germany’s own production. Berlin was able to feed its own population and make up some of the grain deficits of Germany’s allies and occupied territories.

In the following, we shall consider the attempts made to obtain food imports by the Belgian and Norwegian governments-in-exile, and by the ministerial bureaucracies in Brussels and Oslo, in the period before the invasion of the Soviet Union. These efforts began in the summer of 1940 with a parallel drawn by all involved – the feeding of occupied Belgium during the First World War. When that proved to be impracticable, exiled governments and collaborating bureaucrats alike turned to the Soviet Union. But before we follow this story, it might be useful to recall the statistics underlying the dilemma that the two countries faced.

Belgium and Norway had followed different economic trajectories during the nineteenth century, but they converged in the twentieth. The former had begun its industrialization about fifty years before the latter, and Norwegian industry was more geared towards refining raw materials than towards manufacturing. But they were both closely linked to the British and German markets, and they adhered to free trade policies until the 1930s. They also benefitted from the global division of labour to export manufactured goods and services that ensured a healthy surplus in their balance of payments. Like Britain, they used their foreign exchange earnings to import cheap grain and fodder from overseas while relying on domestic agriculture to supply urban areas with eggs, milk, and meat.

Geographically and demographically, however, they were very differently structured. Belgium was the most densely populated country in Europe (275 people per sq.km.), whereas Norway was the most sparsely populated (10 per sq.km.). Norway was ten times the size of Belgium but only 3% of the land was arable; since much of that was climatically unsuited to growing bread grains, 68% of the tillage area was used for fodder.⁴ Sixty percent of Belgian land was arable, but the population was almost three times larger (8.5 million to 2.9 million in 1938). As a result, these two countries were in a similar position in one crucial respect: for every hundred hectares of agricultural land, there were 282 people in Norway and 457 in Belgium. Comparable figures are 372 for the Netherlands and 240 for Germany⁵ Consequently, these countries were dependent on imports of overseas grain to a degree only matched by Britain. But Britain’s naval supremacy ensured access to overseas supplies

⁴ Karl Brandt, *Management of Agriculture and Food in the German-Occupied and Other Areas of Fortress Europe: A Study in Military Government*, vol. 2, *Germany's Agricultural and Food Policies in World War II* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1953), 317

⁵ Figures are from Emil Woermann, *Die europäische Ernährungswirtschaft in Zahlen (The European food economy in numbers)* (Berlin: Institut für europäische Landbauforschung und Ernährungswirtschaft, 1943), Table A1.

during the war; Germany was to meet its needs by plundering occupied Europe; and the structure of Dutch agriculture meant that the question of supplies only became critical at a later stage of the war than we are concerned with here.

“One may conclude that only 43% of Norway’s food consumption was based on genuine domestic production, i.e., either produced as Norwegian crops or as livestock or livestock products from animals fed on domestically grown fodder alone.” “On the average, 60% of her food calories were imported, mostly from overseas in prewar years.” “In terms of calories, Belgian agriculture supplied 51% of the national food consumption.”⁶ On a prewar average, Belgium imported just over 1,9 million tons of bread grain (wheat and rye) and maize annually. The equivalent figures for Norway were around 350,000 tons of bread grain and 140,000 tons of maize. In addition, both countries imported animal feed – to the tune of around 150,000 tons (Norway) and 1,2 million tons (Belgium).⁷

The Netherlands and Denmark were also heavily dependent on overseas imports of grain (above all feed), but their efficient livestock industries produced surpluses for export to Britain. The sector was more capitalized and flexible than Belgian or Norwegian agriculture, which only produced for their domestic markets. Danish agriculture exported products to Germany throughout the war. “The situation [in Belgium] was more serious than in Holland because Dutch import losses primarily affected agricultural exports and only subsequently food supplies for the Dutch people.”⁸ In the Netherlands, food supply only became critical during the last winter of the war.

Belgium’s experience under German occupation during the First World War had already demonstrated how vulnerable it was to a British blockade preventing imports of foodstuffs from overseas. It was widely assumed that the population of Belgium and northern France had only avoided severe deprivation due to the efforts of the Commission for Relief in Belgium led by Herbert Hoover. This was because the foodstuffs it distributed represented a breach in the blockade that the British Cabinet (apart from Churchill) found it politic to accept, due to the pressure of American opinion.

1940: Sowing Illusions, Reaping Disappointment

By July 1940 Belgium and Norway had suffered similar fates: their armies had been overwhelmed by the Wehrmacht in short campaigns; the *coup de grâce* had been delivered by the defeat of France and Britain’s withdrawal from the continent. The Belgian government split, but four of its members, led by the foreign minister Spaak, eventually made it to London in October to declare that Belgium was still at war with Germany. Both governments controlled important resources – the Norwegian merchant navy and the Belgian Congo – that provided foreign exchange and could assist the Allied war effort. King Leopold remained in Brussels, whereas King Haakon followed the government of Nygaardsvold to Britain during the summer.

⁶ Brandt, *op.cit.*, 317, 322, 448; Alan A. Milward, *The Fascist Economy in Norway* (Oxford 1972), 35, 45, 48f.

⁷ Woermann, *op.cit.*, Tables E2 & E4.

⁸ Brandt, *op.cit.*, 449.

Both governments were well aware of their countries' dependence on overseas supplies, and both had made efforts to build up stocks to prevent an immediate crisis.⁹ (It must be said, however, that the Norwegian authorities at no point thought of preparing for occupation; based on their experience during the First World War – which was one of British diplomatic pressure backed up by threats to cut off vital supplies of coal and grain – their reserves were designed to preserve neutrality against threats from the belligerents). But it was not difficult to predict that at some point in 1941 reserves would run out and the need for grain imports would become overwhelming. The crisis could be deferred by reducing livestock maintained (cattle, pigs and especially chicken), lowering rations, and intensifying agricultural methods, but there was still no realistic prospect of these countries being able to feed themselves.

Trygve Lie had been appointed Norwegian Minister of Supplies at the outbreak of war and was to become Minister of Foreign Affairs in August 1940. In his post-war memoirs, he wrote that “No other matter came before the government [-in-exile] more often. Conditions in Norway were constantly on our minds, and the question of what we could do was always on the agenda.” In late June 1940, a Norwegian Relief Committee (NRC) was sent to the neutral United States, to organize relief efforts among the large Norwegian-American community and to lobby the US government to get food shipments through the British blockade. “We thought of a parallel to the Belgian ‘Relief Commission’ which had done so much to assist the Belgians during the First World War,” Lie wrote.¹⁰

The Belgian government set up its economic mission in the United States at the outbreak of war. As in the Norwegian case a year later, an experienced statesman with a well-stocked *carnet d'adresses* was placed in New York to supplement the lobbying efforts of the elderly, aristocratic ambassador in Washington. The Belgian *ambassadeur extraordinaire et plénipotentiaire*, George Theunis, with a long political career behind him, faced the difficult task of securing food supplies to a country with which President Roosevelt and US opinion had little sympathy due to its alleged neutralism, defeatism and the king's decision not to go into exile.¹¹ Norway's man on the spot was Carl Joachim Hambro, the president of the *Storting* and the last pre-war president of the League of Nations, who arrived in New York as one of three members of the Norwegian Relief Committee.

The Dutch, Belgian, Norwegian, and Polish relief committees set up in the United States cooperated with one another when it came to appealing to American opinion on behalf of their countries as a bloc of violated neutrals. It would seem that their primary

⁹ Luis Angel Bernardo y Garcia, *Le ventre des Belges: une histoire alimentaire des temps d'occupation et de sortie de guerre (1914-1921, 1939-1948)* (Brussels: Archives générales du Royaume, 2017), 121-48. There is no equivalent to Garcia's study for Norway, but see Forsyningsdepartementet (Ministry of Supply), *Forsyningsdepartementets virksomhet. Tida oktober 1939 - januar 1940 (The activities of the Ministry of Supply. The period October 1939 - January 1940)* (Oslo: Stortinget, 22, 1940); Nils Ørvik, *Norge i brennpunktet; fra forhistorien til 9. april 1940 (Norway in the spotlight; from prehistory to April 9, 1940)*, vol. 1: *Handelskrigen 1939-40 (Trade wars 1939-40)* (Oslo: Johan Grundt Tanum, 1953).

¹⁰ Trygve Lie, *Med England i ildlinjen: 1940-42 (With England in the line of fire: 1940-42)* (Oslo: Tiden, 1956), 252, 52.

¹¹ Thierry Grosbois, “Les relations diplomatiques entre le gouvernement belge de Londres et les États-Unis (1940-1944),” *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, vol. 202-203 (2001).

function was to use public sympathy for the plight of the small, neutral democracies to mobilize the U.S. Government to put pressure on the British to allow relief supplies through the blockade. It is impossible to say, given the present state of research, whether this was an explicitly formulated policy coordinated among the governments-in-exile in London.

In their dealings with the State Department, on the other hand, the governments-in-exile acted on their own, competing with one another by pleading their respective special cases, meanwhile ever-ready to demand equivalent concessions to those that might be granted to their peers. This pattern was familiar enough from their direct dealings with the Ministry of Economic Warfare in London.¹² The results were meagre indeed, for the simple reason that the MEW knew that any concession granted to one country would immediately be demanded by the others.¹³ This would fatally weaken the blockade – Britain’s most important offensive weapon – at the very moment it was standing alone against a German-occupied continent.

In any case, the precedent set by the Commission for Relief in Belgium during the First World War ceased to apply after Churchill’s speech in the House of Commons on 20 August 1940. The cabinet had decided as early as 25 June to extend the blockade to the occupied (and allied) countries, but it was Churchill who made clear to the world that no exceptions would be made in this war. This re-definition of Britain’s blockade policy had profound consequences for the occupied countries:¹⁴

It is our policy to maintain and enforce a strict blockade not only of Germany but of Italy, France, and all the other countries that have fallen into the German power. [...]

There have been many proposals, founded on the highest motives, that food should be allowed to pass the blockade for the relief of these populations. I regret that we must refuse these requests.

There are strong reasons to suggest that the Roosevelt administration accepted Churchill’s arguments and were not prepared to protest against the infringements of neutral rights they entailed.¹⁵ However, one influential statesman believed that it was not in the interest of the United States to align itself with British blockade policy. Herbert Hoover, former head of the Commission for Relief in Belgium, the American Relief Administration in civil-war Russia and former U.S. President, had organized relief committees for Poland and Finland in the autumn of 1939. A year later they were amalgamated into the Committee for the Relief of the Five Small Democracies. Even before Churchill had spoken, on 11 August 1940 Hoover gave a speech in which he appealed to the British to allow food – financed by

¹² William Norton Medlicott, *The Economic Blockade*, vol. 1: History of the Second World War (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1952).

¹³ National Archives, Kew (NA) FO 371/29417, p. 10, 1 Aug. 1941, Collier to Eden: “... in particular it must be appreciated that any concession made to another occupied country, such as Belgium, could not be refused to Norway without the gravest psychological consequences.”

¹⁴ Winston S. Churchill, *The Speeches of Winston Churchill* (London: Penguin, 1989), 182.

¹⁵ The British Embassy informed the State Department on 17 July 1940 that HMG “have reached the conclusion that they must treat Germany and the territories under her occupation on the same footing...” Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1940 General and Europe, vol.2, nos. 604, 605.

the fugitive governments – to be supplied to the occupied countries, subject to stringent conditions which should prevent Germany from benefitting.¹⁶

Here was the most influential figure in the Republican Party, in an election year in which Roosevelt was standing for an unprecedented third term, advocating a relaxation of the blockade to help the victims of Nazi aggression.¹⁷ It is perhaps not surprising that the relief committees in New York reached out to Hoover to see whether he could help. They were aware that this would displease the British and discontinued negotiations by early 1941, but in the preceding months Hoover's organization did assist the Norwegian and Belgian governments in their attempts to find grain supplies within the blockade.

Hambro had a first meeting with the head of the Hoover organization in New York on 16 August 1940, after first having approached the American Red Cross. He asked for assistance in establishing the present state of Norway's food supplies, offering an initial \$2 million for grain purchases and holding out the prospect of a further \$1.5 million per month if a route to suppliers could be established.¹⁸ Shortly afterwards, Hoover's representative in Berlin, John Hartigan, travelled to Oslo to ascertain the needs of the population. The *Reichskommissariat* provided him with a car and a chauffeur, along with appointments with leading representatives of Norwegian civil society and the ministries concerned. His 17-page report concluded that there was no immediate danger of food shortages, but that prefabricated houses imported from Sweden would alleviate a severe shortage of housing brought about by war damage in many towns.¹⁹

Hartigan also conveyed an offer of \$2 million dollars from the Hoover Organization. His interlocutors in Oslo took this to mean they could negotiate imports of Soviet grain on the basis of this promise.²⁰ Subsequent claims and counterclaims notwithstanding, this does look like an attempt on Hambro's part (disavowed by his colleagues on the NRC) to facilitate the transfer of foreign currency from the Norwegian government in London to the ministerial bureaucracy in Oslo. He soon backed away from his commitment. When he was informed in December of the State Grain Monopoly's plans to send negotiators to Moscow, and of an option Hoover had acquired to buy 50,000 tons of Baltic wheat for Norway, he did not reply. The two men had an uncomfortable meeting at the Waldorf Astoria which did not clear the air.²¹

Hambro's claim that the British and Americans would not release Norwegian government funds for supplies is not quite convincing. The MEW was opposed to allowing grain through the blockade, but wiring currency for purchases within the blockade,

¹⁶ "Starvation in the Occupied Democracies," in Herbert Hoover, *Addresses upon the American road*, ed. Edgar Rickard (New York: Scribner, 1941), 117-118; Joan Beaumont, "Starving for Democracy: Britain's Blockade of and Relief for Occupied Europe, 1939-1945," *War & Society*, vol. 8/2 (1990), 60.

¹⁷ James H. George, "Another Chance: Herbert Hoover and World War II Relief," *Diplomatic History*, vol. 16/3 (1992).

¹⁸ Hoover Institute Archive (HIA) 66587 and National Committee on Food Box 153 Folders 7 & 8 contain multiple copies of the correspondence. See Riksarkivet, Oslo (RA) PA-0260/F/L0003/0005.

¹⁹ HIA Box 153 Folder 7, 16 Sept. 1940 Hartigan: "Report on Relief Needs of Norway".

²⁰ HIA 66587, 16 Oct. 1940 Hartigan to Rickard, enclosing copy of Hartigan to Schöning.

²¹ HIA 66587 "Memorandum concerning relations with Dr. C.J. Hambro," 31 Jan. 1941.

especially if the dollars and the grain they purchased did not go to Germany, was another matter.²² Perhaps the simplest explanation is that after Roosevelt's re-election on 5 November, Hoover would not be an influential Republican insider but a troublesome outsider opposing the Democratic administration's policy on blockade and relief. In any case, the practical upshot of Hambro's excursion into personal diplomacy was that, on the basis of a misunderstanding, the head of the Norwegian Grain Monopoly asked the *Reichskommissariat* to enable visas to Moscow for negotiations on grain imports to be covered by the Hoover Committee, more on which below.²³

Negotiations with Hoover were probably not going to lead anywhere, given the personal animosity between the ex-president and the re-elected president, as well as the firm opposition of the British government to Hoover's proposals and agitation. Hambro followed up his evasions with a public speech in January 1941, which angered Hoover by associating him with pro-Germans and isolationists. Theunis disapproved, but even though Hoover was soon to launch a plan for Belgian relief, he too was to distance himself from the Committee on Food for the Five Small Democracies.²⁴ Perhaps it was an act of spite that led Hoover to publish Hambro's initial letter in a subsequent pamphlet about the Committee's activities.²⁵

If the pamphlet is to be believed, Theunis indicated as early as 17 June 1940 "that the Belgian Government could provide the funds necessary for relief." Whether Theunis followed this up in a manner similar to Hambro, is unclear, but early in 1941 Hoover put forward a scheme to establish soup kitchens under neutral supervision in Belgium.²⁶ As in the Norwegian case, the Committee sent three representatives to ascertain the food needs of Belgium.²⁷ They reported that they were indeed pressing. As in the Norwegian case, an appeal for help (probably initiated by his representatives) was made to Hoover in January by the country's leading men.²⁸

Yet, at the instigation of the British government, the Belgian, Dutch, Polish and Norwegian governments instructed their consuls in Chicago not to attend Hoover's speech in February.²⁹ And Halifax could report from a meeting with the Belgian ambassador and

²² NA FO 371/29415 File N918, 7 March 1941, marginal note: "...there is a great chance of dollars blocked in the US being released for grain imports from the Soviets. We have already admitted the principle and the only [illegible] is over payment." See Medlicott, 583f.

²³ Rossiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Ekonomiki (RGAE), Moscow F.413/op.12/d.5167, 27 Nov.1940 Verbal note from German Embassy Moscow; Politisches Archive des Auswärtigen Amts, Berlin (PA-AA) R106002 4 Dec.1940 Schnurre to Wiehl

²⁴ HIA Box 153 Folder 7, 30 Jan.1941 Theunis on Hambro's speech.

²⁵ National Committee on Food for the Small Democracies, *Food Aid Appeals from the Small Democracies* (New York: 1941), reproduced in Committee of Foreign Relations: *Relief for Starving Peoples of Europe*, 78 Cong., 1 sess. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1944), 17ff. Hambro and Evang refuted some of its claims about the NRC in letters of 23 June and 9 July 1941 to Van Dusen, in HIA Box 153, Folder 7.

²⁶ Hoover, *op.cit.*, 147-55, 16 Feb.1941, Chicago speech "The March of Hunger in Europe"; Beaumont, 64f.; See "British Statement and Hoover's Reply," *New York Times*, 10 March 1941.

²⁷ Bernardo y Garcia, *op.cit.*, 175.

²⁸ Belgian appeal of 28 Jan. 1941 in pamphlet; "Norwegians Send Appeal for Food," *New York Times*, 20 Jan. 1941; Medlicott, *op.cit.*, 570-77.

²⁹ NA FO 837/1220, FO to Halifax, 13 Feb. 1941.

Theunis that they felt Hoover's campaign was "bound to create anti-British feeling" and that publicity was needed to "place the prime responsibility on German shoulders."³⁰ Association with Hoover, shortly before passage of the Lend-Lease legislation, seemed by now to be detrimental to the prospects for aid to the occupied allies. The State Department turned down his scheme, leading Hoover to conclude, in a letter to the Secretary of State "that the American Government accepts the views of Britain in this matter; that you will not even attempt to moderate those policies so as to save the lives of literally millions of women and children in these small democracies."³¹

It is difficult to identify a point at which Roosevelt made a formal commitment to support the British blockade of the occupied neutrals.³² As early as mid-July 1940 the British ambassador, Lord Lothian, reported of a conversation with the US Under Secretary of State that: "Mr. Welles said that he himself, officials of State Department and President, as well as dominant opinion, were strongly opposed to any action which would relieve pressure on Germany by feeding distressed peoples of Europe."³³ In a post-war report to the *Storting*, the Norwegian government suspected that an agreement to this effect had already been reached (at least informally) by the autumn of 1940.³⁴ The correspondence between the British Embassy in Washington and the MEW gives the impression of steady progress towards ever-closer coordination of economic warfare.³⁵ In any case, the US Treasury could quietly carry out such a policy by simply refusing requests to unblock dollar accounts to buy grain.³⁶

The conclusion to be drawn from this American detour is that neither negotiations with the British government, nor appeals to the State Department, nor the mobilization of US public opinion, nor backdoor talks with Hoover could do anything to alleviate the looming food crisis in the occupied countries. Both London and Washington wanted to force the Germans to assume the burden of feeding the population of the countries they had occupied. Both accepted that no available guarantees could ensure that relief would only be provided to innocent civilians; any relief would ease the burden on Germany, despite Hoover's claims. The fact of the matter was that they preferred the populations of the occupied countries to starve. As one official in the MEW put it candidly in August 1941: "We are then setting out to starve our allies with a view to their subsequent liberation. This is not

³⁰ NA FO 837/1220, Halifax to FO, 12 Feb. 1941.

³¹ Hoover made public his side of the correspondence at Senate hearings in 1943; see letters of 24 April and 3 June 1941 (for quote), in Committee of Foreign Relations: *Relief*, 13-15.

³² George, *op.cit.*, 397, claims that "In early 1941, with the British facing a dire military and supply situation, Roosevelt and Hull made their decision: They would support the British on cross-blockade relief."

³³ NA FO 837/1218, Lothian to FO, 14 July 1940; again on 26 Aug.: Roosevelt was "entirely against any relief to any country in Europe occupied by Germany, including occupied districts of France."

³⁴ Undersøkelseskommisjonen av 1945 (The Commission of Inquiry of 1945), *Den norske regjeringens virksomhet fra 9. april 1940 til 22. juni 1945: Departementenes meldinger (The Norwegian government's activities from April 9, 1940 to June 22, 1945: The ministries' reports): Vol.1: Utenriksdepartementet, Regjeringens Informasjonskontor, Kirkedepartementet, Justisdepartementet, Sosialdepartementet (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government Information Office, Ministry of Church Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Social Affairs)* (Oslo: Stortinget, 1948).

³⁵ NA FO 837/1087 & FO 837/1099.

³⁶ Medlicott, *op.cit.*, 59.

an object which we can easily avow either to the Allied Governments or to public opinion anywhere.”³⁷ And Lord Halifax, the recently appointed British ambassador, reported Roosevelt as saying, in February 1941: “Though it seemed a brutal thing to say, he thought that a condition of something approaching starvation would after some time prevail in Europe and that this would be a very vital element in breaking German hold on occupied territories.”³⁸

1941: Spring Wheat from the East

The inability of the exiled governments to procure food supplies for their captive populations placed the burden of doing so on the occupying authorities and the *Reichsministerium für Landwirtschaft und Ernährung* (REM) in Berlin. It also intensified the pressure on those ministries whose remit had been to prepare for such critical shortages since before the war. That leading civil servants chose to shoulder this responsibility together with German authorities can hardly be described as collaboration, although it made cooperation with the occupier inevitable.

Sigurd Johannessen, an experienced civil servant, had been closely involved in Norwegian trade negotiations, especially with Eastern Europe, throughout the interwar years. In the autumn of 1940, he reluctantly agreed to head the Ministry of Trade as one of three non-Nazi ministers in a puppet government. In his post-war deposition for the parliamentary commission charged with investigating the invasion and occupation of Norway, he pointed out that an attempt to obtain grain supplies from the Baltic states in the summer of 1940 had fallen through. As any hope of overseas supplies through some kind of “Belgian relief,” as during the First World War, had to be discarded, “the only possibility that seemed to remain open was the Soviet Union.”³⁹ Soviet sources reveal that Johannessen discussed the matter with the Soviet Trade Mission in Oslo as early as May 1940.⁴⁰ The Soviet Trade Ministry responded by drawing up a list of the industrial products that Norway could provide in exchange (primarily “tzvetnye metally” or non-ferrous metals).⁴¹

Subsequent discussions in the autumn led to the request for two representatives of the Norwegian Grain Monopoly to negotiate the purchase of Soviet grain in Moscow, with reference to funds provided by the Hoover Organization. When they sat down to talks in the Trade Ministry in December 1940, however, it quickly became clear that the Soviet side was not interested in dollars. It would be willing to consider a barter agreement exchanging iron alloys and machine tools for grain and other raw materials but would only negotiate with representatives holding the authority to guarantee such deliveries.⁴²

³⁷ NA FO 837/1222, Minute by W.A. Camps, 11 Aug. 1941.

³⁸ NA FO 837/1220, Halifax to FO, 12 Feb. 1941.

³⁹ RA/S-1566/D/Db/L0011/0027, “Redegjørelse fra handelsråd Johannessen” (Report from trade councilor Johannessen), 21f.

⁴⁰ RGAE F.413/ op.12/d.3842, 12 June 1940 Moiseiev to Mikojan.

⁴¹ RGAE F.413/op.12/d.4089, 29 May 1940 Mishustin memo.

⁴² RGAE F.413/op.12/d.3841 P.M., 18 Dec. 1940.

A similar process took place in Brussels in the autumn of 1940. The three possible sources of supply for Belgium were discussed with the Nazi leadership through a channel that occupied Norway lacked: the royal family. King Leopold's sister, Marie-José, was the Crown Princess of Italy. At a meeting with Hitler in October, she broached the subject of sending a representative to the United States to apply for relief. The Führer doubted whether grain could be imported from America because the unscrupulous British would rather let all of Europe starve than make concessions. When King Leopold returned to the matter of food supplies a month later, Hitler made it clear that Belgium would have to be supplied from within German-occupied Europe. Finally, the king informed the German ambassador in January 1941 that the country would run out of bread by mid-February and had begun negotiations with the Soviet Trade Mission about the rapid delivery of 300,000 tons of grain.⁴³

The *Auswärtiges Amt* seconded these proposals, "Since we are as interested in supplying Belgium with grain as in employing Belgian industry..."⁴⁴ A delegation of the General Secretaries of the ministries of trade and agriculture (Colson and de Winter), the head of the Belgian *Winterhilfswerk* (Heymans) and the president of the Belgian Red Cross arrived in Berlin on 14 January for discussions with the concerned ministries. The head of the trade section of the *Auswärtiges Amt*, Wiehl, believed that grain should be provided to ensure fulfilment of the orders that the German arms industry had placed with Belgian manufacturers, but he recommended that the delegation first negotiate with Moscow.⁴⁵ On the same day, Ambassador Schulenburg reported from Moscow that Mikoyan, the Soviet Minister of Trade, had agreed to negotiate trade agreements with both Belgium and Norway.⁴⁶

Initial soundings had been taken with the Soviet Trade Mission in Brussels in December 1940 that had seemed to open up the possibility of direct purchases of grain to be paid for in gold.⁴⁷ Belgian representatives could not proceed to Moscow before the second German-Soviet trade agreement was concluded.⁴⁸ It was made clear to them that any Soviet grain deliveries would have to be supplementary to those destined for Germany, and that transport capacity across the Black Sea and on railways thereafter was limited.

The Belgian trade delegation arrived in Moscow on 12 February 1941. It comprised General Director Gérard and Director Janssen from the Ministry of Economics, and Director Kelner and M. Landsman from the Ministry of Agriculture. Seven representatives of Belgian industry were to join them on 28 February. The Belgian negotiators were accompanied by their minder from the Military Administration in Brussels, *Oberkriegsverwaltungsrat* Flad,

⁴³ Akten zur Deutschen Auswärtigen Politik (ADAP) XI, Nr.183, 17 Oct.1940; Nr.356, 19 Nov.1940; Nr.643, 11 Jan. 1941; Nr.653; ADAP XII/2, Nr.359, 16 April 1941 quotes a draft appeal from King Leopold to be handed to Roosevelt by a Belgian delegation seeking to negotiate food supplies. It is unclear whether this delegation ever did arrive in the US.

⁴⁴ PA-AA R106002, mid-December 1940 Clodius to Schnurre.

⁴⁵ ADAP XI, 14 Jan. 1941.

⁴⁶ PA-AA R106003, 14 Jan.1941 Schulenburg to AA.

⁴⁷ According to Flad's Bericht, Nr. 2, see below.

⁴⁸ According to Bernardo y Garcia, *op.cit.*, 173, there was no concertation between officials in Brussels and the government-in-exile in London.

who also wrote a detailed record of the negotiations. *Botschaftsrat* Gustav Hilger at the German embassy in Moscow was to take the lead in negotiations with his opposite numbers: Krutikov from the Trade Ministry and Mishustin from the Finance Ministry. The German ambassador himself, count von Schulenburg, appealed to Mikoyan, the Minister of Trade, to break the logjam or to drop Soviet demands that held up the conclusion of a deal.⁴⁹

The course of the negotiations can be briefly summed up by their turning points. The initial Belgian hope of obtaining immediate shipments of grain to be paid for in gold and blocked dollars, followed by substantial imports of both grain and fodder bartered against semi-finished products, was dashed by Krutikov.⁵⁰ He pointed out that the Soviet Union mined its own gold, and what was it supposed to do with blocked dollars in U.S. accounts?⁵¹ The semi-finished products of heavy industry on offer were of no particular interest. It soon became apparent that the Belgian manufacturing industry's machine tools, lathes, electrical motors and cranes would have to be supplied in substantial numbers – and simultaneously with the grain shipments. There would be no Soviet credit in the form of longer delivery times for manufactured goods. Neither would payment through the German-Soviet clearing arrangements be acceptable. There would have to be a bilateral clearing arrangement in Belgian francs, which was also to cover the costs of the Soviet Trade Mission in Brussels.

Moscow drove a hard bargain. The Belgians and their German negotiators had to pare down their list of imports to grain for human consumption and revise their export list to include a lot of sophisticated machinery. They also had to provide the shipping to carry the cargoes to and from the Baltic. By late March an agreement took shape in which 250,000 tons of grain (including 170,000 tons of wheat and 55,000 tons of rye) were to be bartered in monthly equivalents with, among others, 711 machine tools (lathes, drills, cog-cutters), 25 cranes, crane and harbour systems worth RM 5 mill., electrical motors worth RM 5 mill., transformers worth RM 3 mill., tugs worth RM 3 mill., wheels, pipes and various other industrial products.⁵² The formal conclusion was held up (as in the Norwegian case some days later) by the Soviet demand that one of the signatories must be a Belgian representative so as to guarantee that the Belgian administration was bound by its provisions. The *Auswärtiges Amt* did not want this to create the impression that there would be a sovereign Belgium (or Norway) in the future German Europe but agreed to the deal.

⁴⁹ The negotiations can be followed in detail in Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde (BA) R 901/106721, especially the following reports: 4 Feb. Schulenburg to AA; 12 Feb. Hilger: "Aufzeichnung über die erste Besprechung" (Recording of the first meeting); 22 Feb. Hilger to AA; 15 Feb. Hilger: "Aufzeichnung Nr.2 über Sitzung am 14.2.41" (Recording no. 2 of the meeting on 14.2.41); Flad: Bericht Nr.1 (12 Feb.), Bericht Nr.2 (26 Feb.), Bericht Nr.3 (5 March), Bericht Nr.4 (12 Feb.), Bericht Nr.5 (26 March); 25 March Schulenburg to AA; 31 March Hilger to Schnurre; 2 April Schulenburg to Schnurre; 3 April Schulenburg to AA.

⁵⁰ The Belgian shopping list mentioned 300,000 tons of wheat, 100,000 tons of maize, 100,000 tons of rye, 50,000 tons of barley, as well as oil cakes and other fodder, in exchange for iron, zinc, chemical products, glass and cement.

⁵¹ Cf. PA-AA R 106003, 9 Jan., 25 Feb., 1 & 5 March Schulenburg to AA.

⁵² The signed treaty in German and Russian is in PA-AA V11-SOW, Nr.31. It was to last for one year but could be automatically prolonged, subject to renegotiated quotas.

Gérard signed the treaty for Belgium. Schulenburg hoped it could be followed by an immediate delivery of 50,000 tons of grain in April and May.⁵³

The Norwegian negotiations followed a similar, parallel course. The negotiators already knew that Hoover's good offices and the dollars he could convey were of no particular interest. In the course of the negotiations, they tried to barter fish, hides, furs, sulphites, and above all, Norsk Hydro's fertilizer for 50,000 tons of grain, primarily rye, which Norway had imported from the Soviet Union during the 1930s. Only in this case it turned out that the Soviet side was most interested in exploiting the productive capacity of Norwegian metalworking plants that were lying idle for lack of raw materials.

Sigurd Johannessen, Permanent Secretary Lahlum and the Latvian Consul Vannag (who acted as interpreter), were accompanied by their minder, *Regierungsrat* Albrecht of the *Auswärtiges Amt*, who was to ensure that they did not give away any goods of strategic value. They had to bide their time in Moscow while Hilger was busy with the Belgian negotiations, but Wiehl in Berlin was insistent that talks begin in March, "otherwise the trade value of Norwegian deliveries, especially fertilizer, will decline."⁵⁴ The REM, for its part, wanted to prevent fertilizer from being sent to Russia "because we need it for our annexed eastern territories."⁵⁵ Schnurre, the leading negotiator in Germany's economic dealings with Russia, had to point out that leaving out fertilizer would mean that half of the Norwegian list of exports to the Soviet Union would disappear."⁵⁶

The Norwegian offer on 10 March tried to obtain 60,000 tons of rye and 20,000 tons of wheat in exchange for 45,000 tons of fertilizer, 35,000 tons of sulphates and 15,000 hides.⁵⁷ But the initial Soviet response showed more interest in lathes, cranes and tugs – aluminium too, although the Germans were reticent about exporting such an important strategic product.⁵⁸ The revised Norwegian proposal of 28 March branched off in a new direction and included some very different categories suggested by the Soviets. Norway was to import 30,000 tons of phosphate (a necessary supplement for Hydro's nitrous fertilizer that had previously been imported from a recently discovered source in the Kola peninsula), 115,000 tons of manganese ore and around 50,000 tons of chrome ore. Norwegian metalworks were to produce around 15,000 tons of ferrochrome, 26,000 (plus a subsequent 8,000 tons) of ferromanganese and 8,000 tons of silicomanganese.⁵⁹

In its final version of 10 April, the treaty reduced the amount of ferromanganese and almost doubled the amount of ferrochrome in exchange for about the amount of grain originally proposed, plus a significant quantity of cotton (vital for the upkeep of the nets in the Norwegian fishing fleet).⁶⁰ A supplementary treaty offered more grain for more

⁵³ BA R 901/106721, 25 March Schulenburg to AA.

⁵⁴ PA-AA R 106003, 27 March Wiehl.

⁵⁵ PA-AA R 105966, 5 Dec. 1940 Wiehl to Reichskommissar.

⁵⁶ PA-AA R 106002, 9 Dec. 1940 Schnurre to Wiehl.

⁵⁷ RGAE F.413/op.12/d.5396, 10 March 1941

⁵⁸ PA-AA R 105966, Albrecht to Otte, Schnurre's reply 15 March.

⁵⁹ RGAE F.413/op.12/d.5396, 28 March.

⁶⁰ PA-AA R 106004, 2 April Schulenburg to Otte; RGAE F.413/op.12/d.5565, 11 April, appendix to agreement, German and Russian texts of the treaty.

ferrochrome. According to the report prepared by Bender of the REM, Norway's grain deficit until the end of the grain year 1941/2 comprised 100,000 tons of rye and 50,000 tons of wheat. "As long as the supplementary ferrochrome programme is carried out ... Norway's need for bread grains is secured until 30.6.1942."⁶¹

In effect, the Soviet Union was proposing to use the idle capacity of Norwegian metalworks to refine its own ores into alloys that were especially useful for its arms industries. Given the trajectory of Russo-German relations over the following ten weeks, it is perhaps not surprising that the Soviet Ministry of Trade was soon complaining about German bad faith in meeting contractual obligations. Norwegian grain purchasers in Moscow were hoping to dispatch their first cargoes by mid-June, but nothing seems to have arrived by the time Operation Barbarossa began.

It is at this point that the Belgian and Norwegian negotiations in Moscow merge into the broader question of the prelude to Barbarossa. Although Hitler's order to invade the Soviet Union was given in December 1940, there were various forces seeking to use trade negotiations to avert the catastrophe. Many old-school diplomats in the German foreign service believed it was folly to attack Russia before Britain had been defeated while Soviet supplies of fuel, grain, and raw materials were bolstering the German war effort.⁶² Ambassador Schulenberg in Moscow came close to warning Molotov of the attack and certainly supported trade agreements that made peaceful relations more attractive. There is also the possibility that Stalin made considerable concessions in these negotiations in the hope that they would avert or defer war.

Against this backdrop, it is difficult to determine how realistic the Belgian and Norwegian negotiations were. Would Stalin have bothered with them if he had not been trying to appease Hitler? If he was only negotiating to obtain what his arms industries needed to prepare for war, what chance was there that the Germans would supply his needs? Perhaps all we can say is that in the spring of 1941, both sides fulfilled their commitments in the hope of lulling suspicions from the other party. Had this particular climate continued for another year, perhaps the two lesser agreements would also have been honoured.

Whether these treaties would have covered the two countries' food deficiencies is a moot point. Once the war on the Eastern Front began, their only hope was that Germany would make up the difference between domestic production and domestic consumption (which included occupation forces and, in Norway, tens of thousands of foreign forced labourers). Since Berlin planned to create an agricultural order spanning the continent, that hope depended on their place within the Nazi hierarchy of distribution.

⁶¹ BA R-15/VII/445, Bender minute, 15 April 1941.

⁶² Ingeborg Fleischhauer, *Diplomatischer Widerstand Gegen "Unternehmen Barbarossa". Die Friedensbemühungen Der Deutschen Botschaft Moskau 1939-1941 (Diplomatic Resistance Against "Operation Barbarossa". The peace efforts of the German Embassy in Moscow 1939-1941)* (Berlin; Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1991).

Germany did eventually provide some of the grain imports needed by the two countries: 850,000 tons altogether to Belgium and 700,000 tons to Norway. Together with increases in domestic production (and smuggling, in the Belgian case), this meant that the bulk of the population avoided severe malnutrition.⁶³ Some prisoners in Belgian jails did starve to death, while several thousand Soviet and Yugoslav POWs in Norway were worked to death on scanty rations. To determine where this grain came from would require a detailed exposition of the system of plunder and distribution set up by the *Reichsernährungsministerium* in occupied Europe. Suffice it to say here that grain would not have been available for Belgium and Norway without the genocidal plunder of Ukraine and the General Government carried out between 1941 and 1944.

⁶³ John Gillingham, "How Belgium Survived: The Food Supply Problems of an Occupied Nation," in Martin Bernd and Alan Milward (eds.), *Agriculture and Food Supply in the Second World War* (St. Katharinen: Scripta Mercaturae Verlag, 1985), 69-88.