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Viewpoint

Viewpoint: Hunger as a weapon of war: Hitler's Hunger Plan, Native American resettlement and starvation in Yemen

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ABSTRACT

This article will consider the Nazi Hunger Plan as an instrument of annihilation and tool of war, its retrospective reliance on the American example of resettlement of indigenous peoples, and how these policies prefigured the use of starvation against the people of Yemen by Saudi Arabia, aided and abetted by US and British foreign policy.

It is part of a growing literature on state-induced famines.

1. Introduction: Malnutrition as annihilation

In 1940 and 1941, Hitler's senior staff developed a scheme to systematically starve 30 million Ukrainians, Russians and Slavs (Collingham, 2011, pp. 32–39). The resulting food “surpluses” could then be redirected to the Nazi armed forces and German civilians. This effort, known as the “Hunger Plan” (*der Hungerplan*) was led by Nazi Food Minister Herbert Backe, and was intended to create a vast opening in the rich soils of the Ukraine where German settlers would migrate as soon as the native inhabitants were starved or evicted. This would be the realization of Hitler's *Lebensraum* (“living space”), which he described in his 1925 *Mein Kampf* as “the soil policy of the future” (Hitler, 1925).

In 19th Century America, the planned removal of Native American tribes to areas in the West, while not comparable to the premeditated murder of Hitler's resettlements, nonetheless served as an inspiration to the Nazis. They looked back to the American example and saw a template for their own designs for territorial expansion. Today, US policy toward the Saudi Arabia-led coalition attacks and military intervention in Yemen are an uncomfortable reminder that hunger continues as a weapon of war, inflicting suffering on the weakest non-combatants, especially children.

This article will consider the Nazi Hunger Plan as an instrument of annihilation and tool of war, its retrospective reliance on the American example of resettlement of indigenous peoples, and how these policies prefigured the use of starvation against the people of Yemen by Saudi Arabia, aided and abetted by US and British foreign policy. We recognize that the three episodes represent different political, military and historical events as well as legal regimes. Even so, each involves a

combination of purposive blockades, sieges and deprivation of vulnerable populations leading to intentional starvation and death. Our central thesis is that by drawing attention to the commonalities in these episodes (while acknowledging their differences) we may better grasp the criminality of using hunger as an act of war.

Our analysis owes much to a growing literature on state-induced famines, including Maxwell and Majid's study of the 2011–12 famine in Somalia (Maxwell and Majid, 2016), Howard-Hassmann's book on state food crimes (Howard-Hassmann, 2016), O'Grada's historical work (O'Grada, 2009), Flint and de Waal's study on Darfur (2008), a more recent study of mass starvation (de Waal, 2018), and Mukerjee's critical account of Britain's conduct in India during the Second World War (Mukerjee, 2010). We are also mindful of Mao's conduct in China (Bernstein, 2006).

2. The Nazi Hunger Plan

The Nazi Hunger Plan was a carefully laid scheme to create surpluses by denying food to native populations in producing areas of the Soviet Union, especially Ukraine. Its purpose was to support both the 1941 invasion of Russia under Operation Barbarossa (after Hitler broke the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with Stalin) and to expand opportunities for feeding Germany's civilian population. It was outlined in Hermann Göring's “Green Folder” as Plan Oldenburg, calling for the seizure of all stocks of food and raw materials between the Vistula in Central Poland and the Urals in Western Russia. As part of the plan, a separate committee was created to organize the collection of food from occupied areas under Nazi military authority and, in the longer term, to promote German colonization in agricultural areas on a permanent basis.

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The designer of the Hunger Plan (also known as *der Backe-plan*) was agronomist Herbert Backe. Backe, a senior Nazi military planner, was supported by his superior Heinrich Himmler, *Reichsführer* of the SS (*Schutzstaffel*) who like Backe was trained as an agronomist. Both joined the Nazi Party in the early 1920s and rose through the ranks. Himmler built the SS into a million-person paramilitary force which included the state secret police, the *Gestapo* (*Geheime Staatspolizei*) (Collingham, 2011, p. 30). He was the creator of the *Einsatzgruppen*, the death squads responsible for shooting both combatants and civilians in mass executions, in some cases of more than 10,000 people at a time. He also built the death camps responsible for the extermination of Jews, the disabled and mentally ill, as well as political prisoners and gypsies (Roma). Collectively, these groups were described as “useless eaters.”

Himmler would demonstrate that “shooting was easier than starvation, deportation and slavery,” so that by the end of the war, at least as many victims perished from shooting as from gassing (Snyder, 2010, p. 197). Himmler endorsed the killing of women and children in July 1941, and the total extermination of Jews in August of that year, capturing his vision of the resurgence of one race based upon the extermination of others (Snyder, 2010, p. 206). The Nazi Hunger Plan also allowed testing of Zyklon B, the insecticide used to gas Jews at Auschwitz, which was first tried on captured Red Army soldiers. As Snyder recounts, the Soviet invasion was expected to be a quick summer victory, followed by the starvation of some 30 million people (Snyder, 2017).

Backe (1896–1947) was trained in agronomy at the University of Göttingen. His doctoral dissertation was rejected at the Hanover Technical University (as a senior Nazi he later self-published it) titled “The Russian Cereals Economy as the Basis of Russian Agriculture and the Russian Economy” (Heim, 2008, p. 19). This qualified him as the future architect of the Hunger Plan. Backe joined the SA (*Sturmabteilung*) or Brownshirts in 1922 and the Nazi Party in 1925 in Hanover, then farmed until joining the SS in 1933, shortly after Hitler was appointed German chancellor. Backe became an ambitious and successful Nazi technocrat, serving as a vice-minister of agriculture until his rise to acting minister in 1942 (Gerhard, 2009).

As English author Collingham (2011) writes, “Until recently Backe’s role in the National Socialist path to war and the regime’s progressive radicalization has been overlooked” (p. 32). Regarded by historians as an innocuous agronomist concerned only with food, his deep antipathy and aggression toward Ukrainian victims was treated in passing. As Collingham notes, “Neither Backe nor the National Socialist attitude toward food was harmless” (p. 32). As she further notes, “One of the problems with piecing together the history of the National Socialist regime is that the leadership was wary of leaving behind incriminating evidence. Backe warned “clearly in case the enemy should hear of it, it is better not to cite the Hunger Plan” (Collingham, 2011, p. 36).

The Hunger Plan’s purpose, articulated in Göring’s Green Folder, anticipated 20–30 million Russian deaths from a combination of military action and starvation (Tooze, 2006). The Nazi office of economics, headed by General Georg Thomas (who first warned of the transport difficulties likely to arise from the different gauges of German and Russian railroads) fully discussed and vetted the Hunger Plan during May of 1941. Later that month, the agricultural desk of the economics office staff noted that in the Soviet territories: “Many tens of millions of people in this country will become superfluous and die or must emigrate to Siberia” (Kay, 2006, p. 134).

Yale historian Timothy Snyder has described the Hunger Plan as a largely forgotten atrocity, although he estimates that 4.2 million Soviets starved during 1941 to 1944 as a direct consequence of its edicts. Jewish citizens were direct targets, denied the purchase of protein foods such as eggs, butter, milk and meat as well as fruit. Rations in Jewish ghettos under the control of the Nazi army were set at 420 calories per person per day (Tooze, 2006, Snyder, 2010, p. 411). After the launch of the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union in late June of 1941, Soviet POWs were exterminated by starvation. At least 3.3 million of 5.7 million

captured (roughly 60 percent) starved in the course of the war, of which 2 million died by early 1942 (Streit, 1997).

By late November 1941, Soviet death rates in Belarus near Minsk in Nazi POW camps had reached two percent *per day*. At Dulag 131 at Bobruisk, the camp caught fire and thousands burned to death; those seeking to escape were gunned down, leading to 30,000 deaths. In December 1941 death rates at these camps climbed from 200 to 400 to 700 per day. In the Ukraine, prisoners ate the bodies of comrades who had been shot, sometimes before they were dead (Snyder, 2010, p. 179). The logistical difficulty of starving masses of people, together with the collapse of the German war effort, first on the Eastern Front, then in 1944–45 on the Western Front, prevented the horror of the Hunger Plan from being fully implemented, despite the many millions who starved.

Backe, who was arrested in 1945, initially thought that like scientist and V-2 rocket designer Wernher Von Braun, his technical expertise would endear him to the allies. After all, Allied Forces secretly enabled almost 1600 Nazi scientists to immigrate to the US and elsewhere to work on scientific projects, including Von Braun’s efforts on US Saturn rockets. Backe wrote to his wife in 1946 that his talents reflected well on Nazism, which “found its strongest blow in the national socialist agricultural policy.” However after interrogation, probably fearing that he would be turned over to the Soviets, he hanged himself in his Nuremberg cell in April of 1947 (Gerhard, 2009, pp. 63–64).

Collingham (2011), in her sweeping assessment of the role of food as cause and consequence of the Second World War, describes the Nazis’ obsession with securing an agricultural empire and the way in which the Hunger Plan would, as some believed, guarantee it. While too seldom considered in the context of the Nazi war effort, Hitler’s fears and obsessions were centrally focused on food, which drove decisions resulting in the death of millions deemed sub-human (Collingham, 2011, pp. 29–30).

In the interwar years, Germany watched as the world was transformed in comparison to its beleaguered state. Trade and globalization advanced, especially in the food economy. America and Britain emerged as dual hegemonies of this new world order. While Britain had shifted by the late 19th Century heavily towards free trade—relying significantly on food imports from its former colonies in North America and India—Germany remained entrenched in protectionism. As the German economy grew, food production could not keep pace, especially as standards of living and expectations rose. The globalization of the food economy enabled a dramatic switch to more meat consumption (Collingham, 2011).

Pressures on standards of living were high as citizens, especially German housewives, saw how well fed American families were. Snyder (2017) writes: “If the German housewife’s point of reference was Mrs. Jones rather than Frau Jonas, then Germans needed an empire comparable to the American one.” In the face of an underperforming agricultural system confronted by rising expectations, Germany found itself heavily reliant on food imports from both Britain and the U.S. This vulnerability called for alternative sources of sustenance to fuel an aspiring return to imperial authority.

Collingham also describes how a palpable anxiety over food availability gripped the German citizenry. Memories of the hunger suffered during and after the First World War haunted both the German people and the Nazis. During the Great War, Germany had been subjected to an economic blockade; afterward the economic consequences of the peace included heavy war reparations. The resulting call for self-sufficiency and the conservation of precious foreign exchange would allow Germany to focus on expanding its manufacturing exports, strengthening its military and regaining world power (Collingham, 2011).

To do this, the Reich desperately believed in the imperative of territorial expansion. Gerhard (2009) elaborates that just prior to the Second World War, the dominant perspective held by the Nazi party leadership was for territorial expansion, whether gained through guile, threatening diplomacy or force of arms. This territory would supply the

tons of food necessary to supply both German soldiers as they advanced and German citizens at home. Agricultural land would also allow for the reorganization of “a greater European market dominated by Germany” (Gerhard, 2009, p. 55).

It was here that Herbert Backe entered the stage. Recommended for his first position by then-Minister of Food and Agriculture, Walther Darré, Backe began as the agricultural attaché to the Nazi Four Year Plan for self-sufficiency and rearmament, and carefully out-manuevered Darré to become the preeminent agricultural expert in the eyes of Hitler and Nazi leadership (Gerhard, 2009, 2015). Göring and Hitler, with Backe’s technical assurance, became committed to self-sufficiency by gaining Soviet territory to establish the agricultural foundations of an imperial Reich.

To accomplish this, Backe’s Hunger Plan complemented the 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union by siphoning off the flow of food from the rural peasantry in the Ukraine, preventing it from reaching Soviet cities. The Soviet Union was to be divided into a “deficit zone” comprising the forests of Belarus and northern and central Russian cities, and a “surplus zone” in the Ukraine, southern Russia and the Caucasus region (Gerhard, 2009). The perception that the Ukrainian breadbasket was an easily exploitable source of food drove this plan (Snyder, 2017). The deficit zone was to be cut off and starved; the nutritional needs of Soviet cities and the majority population would be ignored entirely, resulting in famine on a massive scale. The surplus zone would then be opened for resettlement.

Backe’s deficit and surplus zones were incorporated as part of Himmler and Konrad Meyer’s *Generalplan Ost* (General Plan for the East), which envisioned a mass migration of Germans into newly acquired territories to work the farms. The new farmland would be “Germanized” by those who fit the vision of an Aryan rural peasantry and replace sub-human Slavs, “exporting” or eliminating them together with other useless eaters including Jews (Collingham, 2011).

In sum, the resolve of the Nazi regime to implement the Hunger Plan was total. Collingham (2011) provides full evidence that Ukraine food “would be diverted on to the plates of German troops and civilians in the Reich” (p. 37). The result was that ‘unbelievable hunger’ in the Ukraine would result. As Collingham observes of the likely starved: “The actual number that Backe had in mind was 30 million, precisely the number by which his administrators calculated the Soviet Union’s urban centers had grown in the past few decades” (p. 37). Collingham notes: “It was with these plans for utter devastation in mind that the German army invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941” (p. 39).

Gerhard (2015, p. 86) concluded that the Hunger Plan, “carefully crafted and brutally implemented,” led to the extraction from the Soviet Union over two and a half years of 7 million tons of grain, three-quarters of a million tons of oil seeds, 600,000 tons of meat and 150,000 tons of edible oils. Another 2.3 million tons of grain was distributed to collaborators and German civilians. Although the Hunger Plan was never fully realized due to the collapse of the German war effort, the total human toll is now estimated at 4 to 7 million Soviet citizens’ lives (Snyder, 2010).

3. Hitler’s American Vision: Indian resettlement and the winning of the West

The 19th Century resettlement of Native Americans is inglorious, and was in many cases homicidal, but is incomparable to the Nazi Hunger Plan. Whether it was genocide is intensely debated, but this question is largely independent of the role that Nazi perceptions of the American experience played in the construction of the Hunger Plan. The general Nazi perception that America had achieved greatness through Manifest Destiny, which necessitated clearing the West of indigenous people, was a powerful template. Hitler’s dreams of a Third Reich were based on capturing fertile hinterlands for exploitation, and the clearing of these lands of their prior inhabitants drew on the American example (Snyder, 2017).

In its own right, the American policy towards 19th century resettlement of Native Americans in the West drew upon the orthodoxy of the time – that the providential destiny of white settlers was to expand westward. As Kakek (2011) notes, expansionists promulgated the concept of Manifest Destiny as a form of white racial supremacy that justified a lesser treatment of lesser people. These expansionists endorsed the concept of an ‘empty continent’, a wilderness to be conquered with only secondary consideration given to its indigenous people (Kakek, 2011, p. 23).

As white-settlers expanded into the Trans-Appalachian Ohio country after the American Revolution, they found themselves pressing up against native territorial claims. With the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, which doubled America’s land area, and the War of 1812, which ended the possibility of threatening native alliances with either the French or British, the U.S. was in position to focus on pushing Native Americans off the land ahead of white settlement. Responsive to these pressures, the Congress adopted the Indian Removal Act during the Jackson Administration in 1830 (NMAI, 2017).

Andrew Jackson had been elected president in 1828 with support from every Western state; territories seeking statehood were anxious to increase white settlement and qualify for state recognition. Several states in the southeast, including Georgia, were also determined to take ownership of existing native lands (History.com, 2009). Putting the 1830 Removal Act into law authorized the negotiation of treaties that would exchange Indian ancestral lands for land in federal territory west of the Mississippi River. In a meticulous study of U.S. land settlement policy in the pre-U.S. Civil War period, Wilm (2018) documented the way in which U.S. government policies disenfranchised Native Americans and African Americans to support white settlements in the American West.

While some native groups moved West under pressure from the government, others were compelled by force. This occurred especially for the Five Civilized Tribes of the Southeast: the Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole (Thornton, 1987, p. 113). Although the Choctaw Nation was the first to be dispossessed, the most storied of the diasporas was that of the Cherokee tribe, whose Trail of Tears is most often cited. Forced removal also occurred in the Great Lakes region. There, instead of being forced westward, many natives were banished to isolated reservations poorly suited to agriculture in arid areas or thin-soiled forests. By 1867, nearly the entire Ojibwe territory in the present states of Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota had been overtaken by a series of treaties relocating natives to these reservations (Kiel, 2017).

Anderson (2014) estimates that the process of resettlement and removal resulted in a loss of 98 percent of native ancestral territory, during which the indigenous population declined by 95 percent from its pre-settlement level (Kakek, 2011, p.101, citing Anderson, 2014). While many factors contributed to this decline, including epidemics of smallpox, cholera, and measles, there were also outright examples of white atrocity consequent to military action. Examples include the Battle of Bad Axe in Southwestern Wisconsin in 1832, in which US Army forces killed many women and children of the Fox, Sauk and other tribes (Trask, 2007, pp. 283-293). The better-known massacre of the Sioux occurred at Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota in 1890 (Thornton, 1987, p. 104). The food ration tickets issued after an 1883 act of Congress moving more natives west of the Missouri River to reservations such as Pine Ridge, South Dakota symbolized the continued pressure on bands such as the Oglala Lakota tribe. In the winter of 1884, government rations on the Blackfoot reservation in Montana were so insufficient that a quarter of the tribe died of starvation (Heat-Moon, 2013).

In a direct exercise of hunger as war, U.S. military commanders in the West during the post-civil War period, led by Major-General Phillip (“Little Phil”) Sheridan and William Tecumseh Sherman (who had directed the Union Army’s devastating march through Georgia to the sea), were now posted as Indian fighters. Among their exercises were the

organization of bison hunting expeditions. As one U.S. colonel told a hunter after he had shot 30 bulls, “Kill every buffalo you can! Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone.” Sheridan viewed “the extermination of buffalo and his victory over the Native Americans as a single, inextricable mission” (Phippen, 2016). As Phippen (2016) notes: the “highest generals, politicians, even then President Ulysses S. Grant saw the destruction of buffalo as a solution to the country’s Indian Problem.”

Jawort (2011) has described the slaughter of buffalo/bison as “genocide by other means.” He argues that Sherman’s scorched earth policy in Georgia provided his own template for later efforts against Indians on the plains. Jawort notes that Andrew Isenberg estimates the original bison population of North America at 30 million animals, and perhaps more. Like Native Americans, the extinction of one would follow the other (Isenberg, 2000). If the bison were extinct, the Indians would have no choice but to surrender to reservation life. Less than 400 wild bison were left by 1893.

The Wounded Knee massacre has become an iconic example of the struggle over the memories enshrined in white military culture versus those of Native Americans. While it has never been disputed that hundreds of Lakota Sioux were chased down and shot by the U.S. 7th Cavalry on December 29, 1890, including many women and children, the dominant narrative has been the official military record. This record, although colored by an inquiry conducted by General Nelson A. Miles critical of the conduct of the soldiers under the command of Colonel James Forsyth, left government culpability for the massacre largely ignored. The government and the participating soldiers conceived of the encounter both as part of a larger race war and as revenge for the losses of Custer at the Battle of the Little Big Horn in June of 1876 (Grau, 2016).

This is supported by the report conducted a year after the event by James Mooney, representing the Bureau of American Ethnology (founded in 1879 at the Smithsonian Institution by John Wesley Powell). This report has been described as “the most influential scholarly interpretation of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee for much of the twentieth century” (Grau, 2016, p. 95). After an extensive review of army and Indian Office archives as well as his own field research, Mooney concluded that while the Lakota were not blameless, “there can be no question that the pursuit was simply a massacre, where fleeing women, with infants in their arms, were shot down after resistance had ceased and when almost every warrior was stretched dead or dying on the ground” (Mooney, 1896, pp. 868–870, quoted in Grau, 2016, p.95).

On the morning of November 29, 1864, in an event prefiguring Wounded Knee and preceding the Little Big Horn, a US cavalry contingent commanded by Colonel “Preacher John” Chivington massacred 450 children, women and old men while the main body of braves was out hunting at Sand Creek, Colorado (Horwitz, 2014). When the blue-clad troops appeared in the morning, the Native Americans raised American and white flags, only to be cut down with carbine fire. Their private body parts and scalps were taken as trophies and later displayed in public lectures by Preacher John to public applause. In an 1886 speech in New York, aspiring politician and future President Theodore Roosevelt remembered the Sand Creek event, noting that “in spite of certain objectionable details...it was on the whole as righteous and beneficial a deed as ever took place on the frontier” (Dyer, 1980, p. 79). Roosevelt said: “I don’t go so far as to think that the only good Indians are dead Indians, but I believe nine out of every ten are, and I shouldn’t like to inquire too closely into the case of the tenth” (Dyer, 1980, p. 86, quoted in Hagedorn, 1921, p. 355).

Faced with the moral taint that comparisons of American and Nazi policies obviously confer, scholars of comparative history have taken sides. Anthropologist Raymond Wood (1990) wrote that the Third Reich was an extension of Hitler’s youthful fantasies of the glories of empire and the American West. Hitler, who had never traveled there, first devoured historical novels set in the American West by Karl May (1842–1912) when in his teens in Austria. He reread and recommended

them to his staff throughout the war and until his suicide in 1945. Little known outside Germany but enormously popular for more than 150 years inside it, May’s novels “were a primary force in the development of (Hitler’s) thinking” (Wood, 1990, p. 313). May’s accounts of American adventure captivated the imagination of huge numbers of German readers, claiming not only fans such as Hitler, but also Einstein, Schweitzer, Hesse, Mann and Kafka. May became one of the best-selling authors in European history, with 50 million copies of his books in German editions alone, translated into 22 languages (Wood, 1990, p. 314).

An ex-convict who spent 8 years in prison, May began writing his fictionalized accounts of America (in which he too had never then set foot) upon his release from jail. Wood notes that as late as the 1960 s, U.S. diplomats serving in Germany were recommended to read May to better understand how Germans viewed American history (Cracroft, 1967, p. 258; Wood, 1990, p. 314). Wood remarks that to read Mays’ accounts of the American West would be like reading Edgar Rice Burroughs’ *Tarzan* to grasp the essentials of Africa.

May’s iconic American hero (“Old Shatterhand”) figured in four books totaling 2012 pages in which occur 2283 deaths. More than one per page occurred, including 2250 people shot, scalped, poisoned, stabbed or beaten to death (Wood, 1990, p. 314; see also Kimmelman, 2007). As Hitler once said, “I owe [to Karl May] my first notions of geography, and the fact that he opened my eyes on the world” (Hitler, 1953; Wood, 1990, p. 316). Hitler read and reread May’s books while directing Operation Barbarossa against Russia, sometimes referring to the Russians as “Redskins” (Payne, 1973; Wood, 1990, p. 317).

Although the story of Karl May’s influence may seem fanciful, there is ample evidence to show that May’s impact on Hitler was profound and never faded. On the eve of becoming Chancellor in 1933, Hitler decided that he would read all 70 volumes of May’s works. He kept a vellum bound set of May’s volumes in his personal library and insisted that every German officer should carry one of May’s “Indian Books” (*Indianerbücher*). On the Eastern Front, he had 300,000 copies of May’s books printed and distributed to his desperate soldiers (Fischer, 2011, pp. 21–22; see also Stadler, 1965). Whether American treatment of Native Americans rose to the level of Nazi conduct is, as noted, a subject of intense debate. Kakel (2013), for one, argues: “The fundamental nature of Early American settler colonialism was the ‘depopulation’ of Indian lands for settlement, which involved ‘clearing’ the ‘former inhabitants’ and ‘repopulating’ these lands with ‘white’ settler colonists—in a continuous process of dispossession” (Kakel, 2013, pp. 30–31).

That Hitler conceived of his plans to starve and enslave Russia and the Slavs in terms of the American West is therefore not debatable (Snyder, 2017). Although occurring in different times, places and contexts, a shadow is cast over the American experience by the comparison alone. In several recent analyses, this debate has played out. In 2012, Guettel compared the evolution of German thought to the American experience, noting that German imperial liberalism in the mid-19th century was both “racist and expansionist, drawing as it did both on examples of westward expansion in the USA and on the discriminating racial policies prevalent in the American South to further the cause of German colonies” (Jensz, 2014, p. 307).

Another Nazi connection with the American West was the infatuation not only with the idea of the American frontier but also the teachings of its iconic representative in American scholarship. Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis” dominated American history studies until the 1960s. His famous essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”, first presented at the meetings of the American Historical Association in Chicago at the Columbian Exposition of 1893, was used to support *Lebensraum* by German political geographers, notably Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904). Ratzel’s Social Darwinism and convictions of race superiority were elaborated by his ardent student, Karl Haushofer (1869–1946), who tutored Rudolf Hess and then Hitler during Hitler’s sojourn in Landsburg Prison, where he was serving time

after the failed Beer Hall Putsch of November 1923. In his prison cell, Hitler composed *Mein Kampf*, fully reflecting the influence of the geopolitics of Ratzel and Haushofer (Kakel, 2013, pp. 10–17). Turner's writings, albeit indirectly, encouraged the German geographers to dream of colonial conquest armed with his Frontier Thesis. Turner himself remarked that “American colonization has become the mother of German colonial policy” (Guettel, 2013, p.2).

Finding academic support for his views in Ratzel and Haushofer's work, Hitler urged his followers to “Germanize (the East) by the immigration of Germans” and to “look upon the natives as Redskins” (Kakel, 2013, p. 32, quoting Hitler, 1953, p. 469). Hitler noted that Americans in the West had “shot down millions of redskins to a few hundred thousand” (Kakel, 2013, p. 32, citing Kershaw, 2007, p. 387). Hitler stated in 1941: “Here in the East a similar process will repeat itself as in the conquest of America” (Kakel, 2013, p. 32; citing Kershaw, 2000, pp. 434-435).

Yet another indictment of American racial policies and their influence on the intellectual construction of Nazi policy is the 2017 study by Yale Law School's James Q. Whitman: *Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law*. Citing the careful, if deeply troubling, work of Nazi legal scholars (such as Heinrich Krieger) published in American law reviews of the 1930s, Whitman unearthed America's legal treatment of Native Americans as a form of race law (Whitman, 2017, pp. 115-116). This law was “founded in the unacknowledged conviction that Indians were racially different and therefore necessarily subject to a distinct legal regime.” As Whitman observes, the Nazi Nuremberg Laws of 1935, setting up a distinct legal/racial regime for Jews, were predicated on this legal analysis (Whitman, 2017, pp. 117–118, citing Krieger, 1935).

In 2016, Edward Westermann published a major defense of American resettlement policy, contending that the violent American experience cannot be viewed as a precursor to Nazi policies and that the concept of genocide is not applicable to America's native people (Westermann, 2016). Even so, the very title of Westermann's book, *Hitler's Ostkrieg and the Indian Wars: Comparing Genocide and Conquest* (2016), suggests that the comparison and relationship between the two is uncomfortably close. Critics of the American experience note studies citing examples such as that of the Yuki tribe in California, which was reduced from as many as 20,000 in 1851 to 85 males and 215 females in 1864 (Madley, 2015, 2016; Guettel, 2018, p. 411). Summarizing a contemporary military assessment of the white treatment of Indians in California during the 1849 Gold Rush, the usually circumspect General E.D. Townsend (later U.S. Adjutant General) wrote in his *California Diary* that an impartial assessment would “exhibit a picture of cruelty, injustice and horror scarcely surpassed by that of the Peruvians in the time of Pizarro” (Heat-Moon, 2013; Townsend, 1970).

The central argument of Westermann is that U.S. policy toward Native Americans, while brutal, was not equivalent to Nazi plans for the Ostkrieg, or Eastern resettlement. As he concludes his study: “Although the U.S. military did not pursue an intentional policy of annihilation, it did embrace, however, an intentional policy of subjugation that entailed specific acts of atrocity and massacre” (Westermann, 2016, p. 251). He shows clearly that the policies were not the same, but does nothing to remove the Nazi reliance on the U.S. experience with Native Americans as a basis for their own genocides.

4. Yemen: Hunger as war

There is a clear connection from the Hunger Plan to the current crisis in Yemen, threaded through Nazi revisionist interpretations of the winning of the American West. Clearly, the racism and depopulation to be followed by resettlement in the Nazi and U.S. cases are not exactly replicated in Yemen. Rather, the essential feature in each of these famines is that they were or are constructed and imposed as political acts of man, not nature. This observation, which can be traced in modern times to A.K. Sen's 1981 book, *Poverty and Famines*, involves

the forceful denial of large populations' entitlements to food. These political acts have received new attention due to work by political geographer Alex de Waal of Tufts University (de Waal, 2018). As de Waal notes, journalists still use the expression “man-made famine” as if it was unusual, when in fact mass starvation in modern times has nearly always been caused by political decisions, often acts of war (de Waal, 2017).

As de Waal writes in his 2017 article, “The Nazi's Used It, We Use It,” the most graphic contemporary example is in Yemen, where military intervention led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates has led to bombings and blockades of the bottleneck Red Sea port of Hudaida, through which 80 percent of Yemen's food was imported before the war began in 2015. As he notes: “Food is the biggest weapon, and lack of food the biggest killer, in the Yemen war” (2017, p. 2). As the famine grinds on, followed by waves of cholera threatening especially large numbers of children, British and American naval and air forces aid, assist and enforce policies of bombing and blockade.¹

Few in the Western Alliance, strained as it is already by the chaos in American and British foreign policy, dare call this Hunger Plan what it is. As one reviewer of this article noted, “what is happening in Yemen is self-evidently a crime whether you link it to earlier history or not.” Still, it is deeply ironic that the intellectual father of genocide studies, Raphael Lemkin, writing in 1944, gave primacy to starvation as opposed to mass killing and extermination as a means to genocidal ends. He described it as “racial discrimination in feeding” and devoted much more attention to food than his single paragraph on mass killings (de Waal, 2017; Lemkin, 1944). Borrowing from Lemkin's terminology, current assessments of the Yemen famine describe it as a “synchronized attack” involving physical, biological and cultural destruction (Bachman, 2019; see also Lemkin, 1944, pp. 82-90; Moses, 2010).

The starvation of Yemen has its roots in the objections of minority Houthis to the proposed division of Yemen after 2011 into six regions, a plan endorsed by the US-backed Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). In reaction, the Houthis seized control of the Red Sea port of Hudaida and in 2015 deposed Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, who had escaped from house arrest and relocated to Aden. Hadi sought refuge in Saudi Arabia and requested its military assistance, leading it to form a Coalition backed by the US and the UK. On March 26, 2015, the Coalition launched “Operation Renewal of Hope” (see Blumi, 2018). The Coalition, led by the Saudis and the UAE, also included Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Sudan, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain. Isa Blumi, of the University of Stockholm, observes (2018, p. 207) that with underwriting from the US and UK, the Coalition has unleashed “a full range of weapons that kill human beings, destroy their habitat and [eliminate the] means to feed themselves” (Bachman, 2019, p. 301). This is the synchronized physical, biological and cultural attack to which those who see genocide refer (Bachman, 2019). And it has overt rather than covert support from the United States and Great Britain.

In physical terms, the Yemen Data Project (YDP), a not-for-profit data collection effort funded by the Open Society Foundations and the Quaker Church-based Rowntree Charitable Trust, recorded 16,749 air attacks on Yemen from March of 2015 to March of 2018 (YDP, 2018). These raids have directly targeted farms as well as port facilities and other infrastructure vital to food transport, reinforced by the air and

¹ One reviewer suggested the important similarity of the Yemen episode to the use of starvation as genocide in the case of the Herero and Nam in German Southwest Africa (1904–08), counter-insurgency famines/humanitarian crises in Biafra (1967–70), Timor-Leste (2015–17), Ethiopia (1984–85), and Darfur (2004–06). Each represents a combination of blockade, siege and depriving populations of the means of survival by military attacks. However, this language also describes both the Nazi Hunger Plan and many elements of Native American resettlement. These episodes also invite comparison to U.S. sanctions in Iraq in the 1990s, the British blockade of Germany during and after World War I (noted above as a Nazi motivation for *Lebensraum*) and “Operation Starvation” in Japan in 1945.

naval blockade (Bachman, 2019, p. 303). These blockades and air attacks are underwritten by weapons sales to the Coalition. In 2016, four of the top five recipients of US arms sales notifications were Coalition members—receiving missiles, bombs, aircraft and engines (Bachman, 2019, p. 307). In addition, by mid-2017, the US had delivered 67 million pounds of fuel to the Coalition and assisted in refueling aircraft 9,000 times, as well as allowing its military bases in the region to serve as refueling centers (see Orkaby, 2017). The London Institute for Strategic Studies' Emile Hokayen and King's College London's David Roberts state that US and UK materials and logistical support are critically necessary to the coalition's capacity to sustain both bombing and blockades (Hokayen and Roberts, 2016; Bachman, 2019, p. 308).

In an exclusive report using whistleblowers' accounts and documents from the port of Aden, CNN (2019) found that Saudi Arabia and the UAE, both U.S. allies, secretly transferred American-made weapons to al-Qaeda-linked fighters and militias in Yemen in violation of agreements with Washington. Identified specifically was Oshkosh Defense, manufacturer of armored vehicles. Meanwhile, the conflict between Houthis and the U.S.-backed Saudi coalition continues unabated.

On the biological and cultural sides of Lemkin's genocidal troika, the consequences of Coalition attacks include a 100–200 percent increase in Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) in children since 2014, equal to at least 402,000 Yemeni children, with 2.2 million requiring urgent care (Bachman, 2019, p. 304). In addition, 9.9 million of these children are in need of nutritional assistance, according to UNICEF as cited in a 2017 article in *The Lancet* (Eshaq et al., 2017, p. 32). Reports in 2018 indicated that 8 million people were at risk of famine, and that more than 1 million were infected with cholera, as water supplies become contaminated from disruptions due to war (*Washington Post*, 2018).

On the cultural side, some of the world's most important cultural sites, including temples, ancient irrigation works, and cities such as Zabid, Sana's and Shibam (all thousands of years old) are under attack from air and ground forces. According to the YDP air-raid data, 137 bombing raids have struck these locations, many of which are included in UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites (Khalidi, 2017).

Apart from extending its vast weaponry for use in Yemen, the Trump Administration has aggressively opposed bipartisan efforts in Congress to restrain it. In mid-April 2019, Congress passed the Yemen War Powers Resolution to assert authority over US Yemen policy, which Trump vetoed on April 16, 2019. This occurred even as United Nations estimates of the risk of famine grew to 14 million—half of Yemen's population (Shesgreen, 2019; UN, 2018). On May 2, 2019, a vote to override Trump's veto was defeated 53–45 in the Senate. On July 24, Trump vetoed three resolutions that Congress had passed to stop arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which had been pushed through without Congressional approval (Demirjian and Itkowitz, 2019).

In mid-2019, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) issued a report prepared by the Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures of the University of Denver (Moyer, et al., 2019) that projected the likely consequences of continued war on the Yemeni population. It estimated that by the end of 2019, Yemen will have lost 89 billion dollars in economic output. If the war continues through 2022, the study predicts that nearly 500,000 will die, and if it extends to 2030, the toll will be 1.8 million people, including 1.5 million children under five years old. In November, 2018, reported children's deaths from war were already estimated at 85,000 (Karasz, 2018).

The drone attacks on Saudi oil facilities over the weekend of September 14, 2019 were apparent revenge by Yemeni Houthi rebels. However, they were interpreted by the U.S. administration as an act by Iran. With close to 67.6 billion dollars in arms purchases in 2018, Saudi Arabia has proven proficient at attacking unarmed civilians and food-related infrastructure, but appeared utterly incapable of defending its vital oil terminals against the attacks that occurred in mid-September. As Max Boot of the Council on Foreign Relations noted in the

Washington Post, Saudi actions in the Middle East, supported by myopic policymakers in Washington, London and elsewhere, have created a “tinderbox on the verge of igniting” (Boot, 2019).

In early 2020, the Yemen situation remained unsettled. While air attacks subsided in late 2019, the UN continued to rank Yemen as the world's largest humanitarian crisis. Because of damage to infrastructure and transportation, as well as restrictions imposed on the Red Sea Mills silos in the port of Hudaida, World Food Programme grain stored there has been undistributed. It would feed 3.7 million people for a month. This is due in part to decisions made by the rebel Houthis (Save the Children, 2018). In September 2019, the United Nations reported that the U.S., UK and France may be guilty of war crimes, citing 160 key actors in the Yemen conflict who could face charges (Wintour, 2019).

5. Conclusion: Hunger as an act of war

The Nazi Hunger Plan, while less well known than the systematic annihilation of Jews and others in the death camps, looms large as an example of Nazi atrocity. Inspired in part by a romanticized view of Native American resettlement, the racist legal foundations of American Indian law, and Turner's “frontier thesis” as historical geography, it causes us to look again at U.S. history and to reflect on white treatment of Native America. Most importantly, both the Hunger Plan and Native American resettlement should cause us to look squarely at U.S. and British policy in Yemen as complicit in the perpetration of hunger as an act of war.

What are the lessons for policy from this record? First, the use of starvation as a weapon of war is a clear crime against humanity, especially children. This requires no arcane legal interpretation, but has longer-term economic and human welfare implications. The secondary effects of widespread hunger imposed on non-combatants are not only the losses of productive life, but widespread morbidity, disease and suffering. This complex of effects is imposed on those who die but also those who do *not*, and suffer chronic disability or ill-health for the rest of their lives, with effects that echo down across generations. The result is to stunt both individual and collective welfare psychologically and economically. War and sudden death are always terrible, but hunger as a weapon of war imposes chronic losses that persist and do damage well into future lives.

There is also the argument for attempting to establish legal norms around a “right to food.” One author's first publication, in 1977, focused on this subject (Runge, 1977). The proposal offered by Howard-Hassmann (2016) also revolves around this right, in which a new international treaty would reiterate the relevant clauses of the UN Genocide Convention and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. As one reviewer noted, a serious lacunae in this body of law is the Rome Statute's failure to thusfar replicate prohibitions on starvation for non-international armed conflicts. Howard-Hassmann's proposed treaty would include new measures prohibiting penal starvation and penalties for those who execute it. It would also identify obligations of donor and recipient states for food aid and specify sanctions for “food crimes.”

One earlier legal assessment of starvation as a means of warfare notes that the issue has not been well-defined under the law of war (Mudge, 1970). That there are “rules of war” or norms prescribing genocidal violence is important. But as soon as there are rules or norms, human nature finds ways to subvert them. Because it is so difficult to trace starvation as a means of direct action, hunger as a weapon of war is often employed to kill without direct culpability. Mudge (1970, p. 244) wrote, “... legal writers have usually regarded human starvation only as an effect of other acts. The legal justification of human starvation has thus focused on the legality of the acts which give rise to it, and not upon the application of the principle of military necessity or the principle of humanity to the effect of these acts—human starvation.” Mudge noted that it is often implicitly assumed that the government overseeing a starving population will capitulate and sue for peace. If it

does not, or if the “government” is contested or one of a failed state (as is arguably true in Yemen) then “the starvation of a civilian population that does not cause capitulation or is reasonably calculated to do so is genocide” (Mudge, 1970, p. 268).

Marcus (2003) has also called for the criminalization of “famine crimes”: first if one knowingly creates or prolongs conditions leading to starvation, and second if evidence that policies creating or prolonging this starvation is ignored (Marcus, 2003, p. 247). Whether such proposals will be seriously considered and implemented is, unfortunately, difficult to predict. One author has faced frustration advocating for an international ruling body for the environment, a far less controversial proposal than rules of war and genocide by starvation (Runge, 2001). Even so, it is clear that Howard-Hassmann (2016, p. 221) is correct to say that food is a core human right, and that hunger as a weapon of war is profoundly wrong.

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