FOOD RATIONING IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

At the outbreak of World War One people nationwide were subject to price rises and food shortages. At the start, there was a fear of food shortages, but the real shortages didn't hit home until 1915, these initial prices and shortages were a reaction to the announcement that Britain was at war.

It seems the main cause of early food shortage was that farmers, suppliers and shop keepers were holding back stock; maybe they believed that they would need their produce past Christmas 1914, or they were just taking the opportunity to profit from the situation.

In August 1914, the Government was considering introducing legislation to tackle this problem. There had been many cases of unreasonable holding of food stuffs around the country where there had been great hardship especially among the poor.

The Board of Trade was granted powers to act if foodstuffs were being unreasonably withheld from the market. The Board could take possession of such foodstuffs paying a reasonable price for the goods, to ensure their availability to the people. The newspapers were full of pleas not to buy in excess and not to hoard food. Bread and flour were hard to come by and government posters encouraged people to eat less bread.

'The Win-the-War Cookery Book' carried this message: 'Women of Britain … Our soldiers are beating the Germans on land. Our sailors are beating them on the sea. *You* can beat them in the larder and the kitchen.'

Hunger stalked the civilian populations of all the combatant nations. Agriculture and food distribution suffered from strains imposed by the war and naval blockades reduced food imports.

Some countries met this threat more successfully than others.
The war took men and horses away from farm work. Imports of nitrate fertilizers were hit. Reduced agricultural output forced up prices and encouraged hoarding. Governments responded by putting price controls on staple foodstuffs. Food queues formed of women and children became a common sight in cities across Europe. In Russia and Turkey the distribution of food broke down. The Russian revolution had its origins in urban food riots. In Turkey many starved. Austria-Hungary eventually succumbed to the same calamity.

In August 1916, a group of soldiers' wives wrote to the Hamburg Senate demanding its support for a peace settlement: 'we want to have our husbands and sons back from the war and we don't want to starve any more'. The government's failure to ensure adequate food supplies and their equitable distribution, particularly to poorer people living in Germany's towns and cities, impacted upon popular opinion towards the government and also the population's support for the war.

The German government had made no economic plans for a long war. In 1914 Germany depended on imports for about a third of her foodstuffs, fodder, and fertiliser, and these were affected by, among other things, the blockade put in place by the British navy from November 1914. Germany became, to a large extent, dependent on what her own farmers could produce. German agriculture was a mix of large estates in Northern Germany and some four million small farms elsewhere. As men and horses were called up, farmers' wives took over the running of the farm, but lack of equipment, fertiliser, and manpower, even though some 900,000 prisoners of war worked on the land, saw substantial falls in crop yields, which almost halved by the war's end. A lack of fodder led to livestock losing weight, impacting on the supply of meat and milk. In July 1918 meat rations amounted to 12% of pre-war consumption.

The government, claiming that Germany had enough food to survive the blockade provided people reduced consumption, had to try, and lower consumption and, at the same time, ensure that there was an equitable distribution of food at affordable prices at a time when priority was given to providing food for the army.

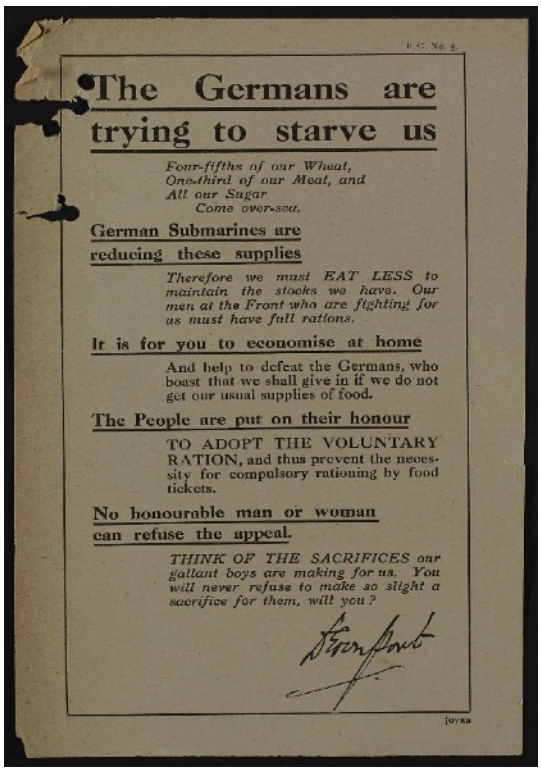
Food provisioning on the home front was the responsibility of the local authorities. Across Germany individual towns and cities had traditional food supply chains, with some securing their provisions from the surrounding district and others, such as the Ruhr, dependent on supplies from further afield in Germany and abroad. This was to be significant as food shortages grew and transportation was affected by military demands, and, in the winter of 1916/17, by the weather.

At the start of the war there was a rush to buy staple foods to hoard, leading to price rises, and so the government allowed local authorities to introduce a system of price ceilings, which varied from place to place, not just in the maximum prices set but also the foodstuffs affected. Farmers, who resented interference in the free market, took their produce to places with higher or no price ceilings, or used it for animal fodder. This led in early 1915 to the slaughter of about one-third of Germany's pigs, seen as competitors for scarce food resources, impacting on later meat and fertiliser supplies. From October 1914 to eke out grain supplies bakers were allowed to use potato flour in the making of bread, the so-called *K-Brot* (K for *Kartoffeln* (potatoes) or, more patriotically, *Krieg* (war)), but continuing shortages led to the rationing of bread from January 1915. Throughout the war, other additives such as corn, lentils and even sawdust were used to eke out bread.

The autumn of 1915 was to see food riots in several German cities, as women protested about the new higher price ceiling for butter and food shortages. The government responded by decreeing that no fats were to be sold on Mondays and Thursdays, no meat on Tuesdays and Fridays and no flour at week-ends. A wave of food-related riots spread across Germany in summer 1916 and women would march to the town hall and demand better food supplies.

Potatoes had been rationed in April 1916, butter and sugar in May, meat in June and eggs, milk, and other fats in November. In late 1916 the government decreed that workers in heavy industry could receive extra rations. Women in the last three months of pregnancy also got extra rations, including full milk, to which children under six were also entitled. The amount of rations varied from place to place, which caused unrest as some areas felt others were receiving more.

Women would begin to queue for their rations early, often bringing their folding chairs and their knitting, to ensure they got something. If the shop sold out, they had to go and queue elsewhere. However, rations were not always available. Toni Sender, a pacifist feminist, later wrote 'more often than not the word "butter" on the ticket was all one saw of butter.'


F.C. No. 5.

The Germans are trying to starve us

Four-fifths of our Wheat,
One-third of our Meat, and
All our Sugar
Come over-seas.

German Submarines are reducing these supplies

Therefore we must EAT LESS to maintain the stocks we have. Our men at the Front who are fighting for us must have full rations.

It is for you to economise at home

And help to defeat the Germans, who boast that we shall give in if we do not get our usual supplies of food.

The People are put on their honour

TO ADOPT THE VOLUNTARY RATION, and thus prevent the necessity for compulsory rationing by food tickets.

No honourable man or woman can refuse the appeal.

THINK OF THE SACRIFICES our gallant boys are making for us. You will never refuse to make so slight a sacrifice for them, will you?

[OVER

The language of the leaflets was designed to deliberately tap into civilians' fears. One warns that 'The Germans are trying to starve us,' suggesting that conserving food stocks is essential to avoiding defeat. 'Our men on the Front who are fighting for us must have full rations,' reads another line. On the back of the leaflet sits a cartoon of John Bull – a personification of England – standing on weighing scales. Bull is delighted that after beginning his rational service of voluntary rations he's lost weight: 'Sacrifice indeed,' he says, 'Why I'm feeling fitter every minute! And I've still got plenty of weight to spare.'

In the winter of 1916/17 weeks went by without potatoes, because of the poor harvest and transportation difficulties, and the turnip was used extensively as a replacement – it, too, was rationed. The Head of the Prussian Commission for the Provisioning of the People noted, 'women's wallets were filled with food ration cards of every kind, but the rations were often so minimal that it wasn't worth picking them up.'

In January 1917 Princess Blücher, an Englishwoman married to a Prussian aristocrat, wrote in her diary: 'we are all growing thinner every day, and the rounded contours of the

German nation have become a legend of the past. We are all gaunt and bony now, and have dark shadows round our eyes, and our thoughts are chiefly taken up with wondering what our next meal will be.'

By summer 1917, rations amounted to some 1,000 calories daily, about 40% of pre-war intake, but fluctuations in the harvest saw the calorific value of rations increase to 1,400 by summer 1918. During the war over 11,000 substitute foodstuffs were approved and they were of dubious nutritional value. Princess Blücher noted in her diary that 'I don't believe that Germany will ever be starved out, but she will be poisoned out first with these substitutes.'

Food shortages were felt most acutely in urban areas, and affected the poor disproportionately as they were dependent on rations and could not afford to buy food on the black market.

By 1918 an estimated one third of Germany's food supplies were being sold on the black market, and one of its biggest customers was heavy industry which bought in supplies to boost its workers' rations. Ethel Cooper, an Australian musician who spent the war in Leipzig, could afford to eat in restaurants and throughout the war received food and hospitality from an English friend married to a German wool merchant who got food from their estate in the countryside. Ethel noted that she could eat pheasant and pigeon, but had no sugar, flour, or milk.

Food was more readily available in the countryside, and urban consumers came to believe that rural producers were profiting from their suffering. If the urban poor had relatives in the countryside they could obtain food from them, or they could 'hamster' – travel into the countryside and barter, buy or steal from rural producers, though they ran the risk of having the food confiscated by inspectors at railway stations on their return.

Children of Berlin being fed with midday soup from a mobile field kitchen. Taken during the First World War by an official German government photographer.

On one day in June 1917 inspectors at a small West German town confiscated '36 pounds of butter, 421 eggs, 5 hundredweight of flour, nearly 30 pounds of peas, 42 pounds of veal and 12 pounds of ham'. But the authorities were complicit – the railways put on extra trains to cater for the hamsterers, who were aggrieved that black marketeers and war profiteers could go about their business with impunity.

In 1916, with food prices having doubled since the start of the war, the government ordered all towns with over 10,000 inhabitants to expand their provision of soup kitchens, to ensure that people had access to one warm meal a day. By October 1916, some 357 towns had 1,438 kitchens, by February 1917, 472 towns had 2,207 soup kitchens. Use of the kitchens depended on the amount of foodstuffs available in the shops, and the spring of 1917, following the failure of the potato harvest in 1916 and the difficulties caused by the harsh winter in the transportation and storage of food, saw an increase in demand. In Hamburg, where the use of soup kitchens was high, some six million portions were served in April 1917 and over a year later some 20% of the population continued to eat a meal from a soup kitchen. From late 1916 customers had to exchange their weekly meat and potato ration cards in order to get a week's ticket for a soup kitchen meal, and they also paid a small sum.

Those who could tried producing food for themselves – on balconies, keeping goats, rabbits, and hens. Towns, too, turned parks into fruit and vegetable plots to feed the people. In Stuttgart authorities bought 740 acres of land to keep pigs fed by recycled kitchen waste. Once sold the money was used to feed 7,500 schoolchildren.
But the opportunities for the urban poor to produce food for themselves were limited, and so they were reduced to hamstering, and, as the war went on, looting or stealing. The numbers of women convicted of

crimes against property doubled between 1913 and 1917, and there was a growth in youth crime, as they, too, stole.

From 1917 onwards a deterioration in the health of the nation was clearly visible, with increases in stomach and intestinal illnesses. The Germans estimated that some 763,000 people died during the war from malnutrition and its effects. Between 1913 and 1918 the death rate from tuberculosis in towns with more than 15,000 inhabitants rose 91.1%. The numbers dying of typhoid doubled between 1916 and 1917. In Düsseldorf, the number of reported cases of dysentery rose from 8 in 1914 to 351 in 1917. By December 1918 over half the children in Chemnitz's schools suffered from anaemia, children across Germany were smaller and lighter, and 40% of them suffered from rickets.

Germany introduced numerous government controls on food production and sale, but these proved to be badly thought out and worsened the effects of the British naval blockade. Substitute foodstuffs were produced from a variety of unappetising ingredients, but their nutritional value was negligible, and Germans became increasingly malnourished from 1916 onwards.

The armistice in November 1918 did not bring much easing in the food crisis. It was to be July 1919 before the blockade was lifted and disturbances over food continued throughout 1919. Some price controls and rationing of various foodstuffs remained in place until 1922. In June 1921, a million children a day were fed in the 2,271 food kitchens run by the Quakers in 1,640 German communities. The Nazis were to learn the lessons of the government's inadequacies in maintaining adequate food supplies on the home front during the First World War and tried to ensure that racially valuable Germans had sufficient to eat during the Second World War.

Germany's campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare was intended to expose France, Italy and especially Britain to the same food crisis. These countries relied heavily upon imported grain and viewed the submarine campaign as a deadly threat. They attempted to increase their own food production, but their main success was in introducing successful systems of rationing. Britain introduced rationing in London early in 1918 and extended it nationwide by the summer. British civilians defied German expectations by accepting this state intrusion into their daily lives.

The cost of food more than doubled during the war years. Some prices went up by even more than that. A pint of milk cost a penny in the early 1900s. Just after the war, people were expected to pay sixpence a pint. As the fighting dragged on, fresh fruit, vegetables and meat got harder to find. There were even stories of butchers selling dead cats!

A food queue in Reading during 1918.

Bread and flour were very hard to get. By 1916, bread was being made from ground-up turnips. The new Ministry for Food put out a leaflet with ideas for making pastry, cakes, and buns from potatoes, and even 'chocolate potato biscuits'. Mothers had to be inventive in the kitchen. Wartime cookbooks had ideas for foods like 'potted cheese' - leftover crumbs of cheese, mixed with mustard and margarine, baked in the oven, and served with biscuits or toast. Another recipe used cooked fish, rice, and breadcrumbs to make 'fish sausages'.

Because of the German unrestricted submarine warfare, which affected the food supply being imported into Britain. This made food shortages a serious problem and by 1918 malnutrition was seen in poorer communities. The Government introduced compulsory rationing in 1918.

WW1 1918 ration card - The card bears the instructions:

To register for MEAT, BUTTER, and SUGAR, fill up the counterfoils A B and C on the lower half of card, and give them to any Retailers you choose. The Retailers must write or stamp their names and addresses on these spaces. You could not be able to change your Retailer again without consent of the Food Office.


Holder's Surname Claude
Christian Name Leonard
Address 3
KEEP THIS CARD CAREFULLY
RATIONING ORDER, 1918. N. 86.
Food Office of Issue.
Name and Address of BUTCHER A
Name and Address of Retailer for D
Name and Address of BUTTER Retailer B
Name and Address of Retailer for E

A Brierley Hill company in the West Midlands, Marsh and Baxter were reported as distributing 10,000 hams a day. Due to the demands on goods wholesalers had largely been depleted of stock.

A reporter visited the company and saw that they were very busy packing hams ready for transportation at the rate of 1000 an hour. On Wednesday over 7000 hams were packed and on Thursday the total was up to 10,000. Marsh and Baxter were the largest ham curers in the UK; in normal conditions they stocked up to 100,000 hams and enormous quantities of bacon. Pigs at this time were in short supply.

In the 19th Century many Black Country families kept pigs. Most pigs were kept in sties in the backyard, but there are some known cases of rather more unusual housing, like pigs kept in cellars. To avoid inappropriate pig housing and to improve overall sanitary conditions, local government-imposed rules, and regulations on the keeping of pigs. In 1916, Government regulations were relaxed because of the war.

To combat food shortages and price hikes, people were encouraged to grow their own produce and keep their own livestock in their own gardens, allotments, and other areas of land.

By 1917, radical gardening advice was promoted through local newspapers about the growing of celery on a small, wartime garden plot. It was argued that it took up too much space, used too much manure and occupied the ground for too long. It was not comparable in food value to beetroot.

'*People should grow food, not luxuries. Celery is low in food value and could be dispensed with Celery is the only salad crop that consumes more calories eating it than it supplies'*

In 1918, The Local Parks Committee were asked to consider removing flower beds and growing vegetables instead. This was in addition to the practice of growing potatoes on park land.

During the war, bread had, by law, to be sold by weight, not by loaf. In order to be sure not to break the law, bakers weighed out or gave away extra little pieces of bread like tiny rolls with the loaves that they sold. These were known as makeweights. Children - who used to go on errands to the bakers - were usually allowed to eat these makeweights on the way home.

Bread was not rationed, but steps were taken to decrease its consumption. The government issued an order saying bread could not be sold to a customer until at least twelve hours after it was baked. The thinking behind this rationale was that fresh bread was very difficult to cut thinly, and people would therefore

Coal shortages at home were caused by the lack of labour available; many miners had volunteered to serve in the forces. Coal shortages were also apparent across Europe, France's industries had been hit hard by the invading German troops and the country was importing coal from Britain to aid its armament production. This only added to the shortages at home.

consume more if the slices were thick. Furthermore, the more appetising taste of fresh-baked bread was more likely to encourage people to eat it 'immoderately'.

Another measure was to replace the ordinary white variety of loaf with a 'national loaf' made from wholemeal grain. We now look upon this as a healthier option, but at the time most people disliked the taste and found its colour unappetising, while many housewives blamed it for a variety of digestion problems.

At the outbreak of World War One, newspapers warned of coal shortages and also against coal hoarding. But it was not until February 1915 that coal production slowed, and a coal famine was reported.

Originally coal rations were not for individuals but for households, and this was confirmed and related to the number of rooms one has in the house.

In 1918, Britain brought in a system of rationing, where what food there was got shared out more fairly. Everyone was given a ration book that showed how much food they were allowed to buy, including sugar, meat, flour, butter, margarine, and milk. Even King George and Queen Mary had ration books. Richer families discovered what it was like to go hungry. Some of the poorest families, however, found rationing left them better-fed than before the war.

Wartime also produced some new foods: dried soup powder, and custard that just needed water adding. There was even a recipe to make Christmas pudding, using 'egg substitute'.

By early 1918 ration cards had been distributed and shop owners were asked to send details of tea, butter, and margarine stocks to the Food Control Committee. Ration cards were tied to a retailer and could only be transferred to another shop once they had run out. The Food Control Committee could transfer cards if they believe that retailer had too many customers.

Extra rations for 'arduous workers' were granted (18 May 1918) but this allowance for 'arduous work' caused a few anomalies. A postman qualified, but a post woman did not! Adolescents faced a similar problem between the sexes with a distinction between boys and girls.

A German food store looted in 1918.

Huge numbers of men were conscripted during the First World War in Germany and, as more were called up each year, this left the country short of male labour.

A shortfall in food importation, partly due to blockades by the Allied Forces, resulted in food shortages across Germany. Significant loss of life in the armed forces resulted in many homes being without a husband or father.

With mass conscription and subsequent call-ups year after year, employers were faced with the same problems of filling the positions of millions of men. They opened up jobs to the remaining population on the German home front and turned to two social groups, each of which experienced the workplace differently; women and youths.

While the millions of men that made up the German army were fighting, many women and families were left to adapt to home life as they had never experienced it before. The loss of a husband or father meant a loss of income, and families struggled to survive on government hand-outs. By 1918 there was a 'surplus' of two million women, mainly widows, who were trying to live on meagre government pensions.

It was these women upon whom Germany relied on to cover the labour shortage, creating an income for families and to stabilise employment. While it seems such women played a major part in the German economy, there were some very serious disadvantages to working.

Women increasingly found themselves being treated as inferior to the men they worked alongside and those away fighting. Many employers made it clear that once the war ended their jobs would not be safe and would be re-opened to the men that had left them behind.

A shortfall in food production and importation meant that Germany was required to increase its agriculture to feed both a vast army, as well as civilians. The food that was available to civilians was expensive too, with wages often not high enough for families to afford a proper diet. Mortality rates for children rose along with those of adults and elderly citizens, and many people died of malnutrition or diseases related to weakened bodies. By 1915 the food situation reached critical levels in urban areas.

This resulted in resentful feelings towards those who worked in rural areas, with rumours spreading that farmers were stockpiling food for themselves. Food riots spread across the land in response to the food shortage, as basic amenities became more and more scarce.

By 1916 soap, fat, cheese, butter, and eggs were unavailable, while coal, shoes and textiles were scarce. With food prices getting higher and higher, the government implemented maximum prices on certain products, including sugar and potatoes.

To combat the decrease in availability of food, the German government also established compulsory 'meatless' and 'fatless' days. The people left on the home front largely relied on a diet of potatoes on bread, but these also became difficult to purchase towards the end of the war. To control the supply and distribution of essential household produce, Germany established a war food office; although its limited power meant that it could not control other organisations that dealt with produce.

There were many laws introduced to make distribution fair, but because so many new agencies were introduced during the First World War, this led to counter-productive decisions that hardly benefitted families.

The German Government made strenuous attempts to alleviate the worst effects of the Naval blockade, and the Hindenburg programme introduced in December 1916, was designed to raise productivity by ordering the compulsory employment of all men between the ages of 17 and 60 years.

A complicated system of rationing, first introduced in January 1915, aimed to ensure that at least minimum nutritional needs were met. In larger cities 'War Kitchens' provided cheap meals on mass to impoverished local citizens.

Such schemes, however, enjoyed only limited success. The average daily diet of 1,000 calories was insufficient even for small children and disorders relating to malnutrition such as Scurvy, Tuberculosis and Dysentery were common by 1917.

Official statistics attributed nearly 763,000 wartime deaths in Germany to starvation caused by the Allied blockade. This figure excluded the further 150,000 German victims of the 1918, which inevitably caused disproportionate suffering among those already weakened by malnutrition and related diseases.

Although the blockade made an important contribution to the Allied victory, many of its devastating side effects cast a long shadow over post-war German society.

Berlin inhabitants cutting up a horse for meat during fighting in the city.

Although Germany signed an armistice with the Allies on 11 November 1918, the trade blockade was maintained - at France's insistence - until the new German republic signed peace terms in Paris at the end of June 1919. It illustrates starkly the widespread hunger in the city at this time, as women and children hack away pieces of meat from a horse killed in the fighting.

From David Lloyd George's Memoirs in 1938.

So far as the vast bulk of the population was concerned, this rationing system, troublesome though in some respects it was to them, ensured a regular and sufficient food supply; and it made it possible for those in charge to calculate with some precision how best they could make the stocks of available food-stuffs go round equitably.

When meat was slightly more plentiful, the ration could be raised. When it grew scarcer, the amount purchasable with each meat coupon was cut down. The steady improvement in our national health figures during and after the War, as compared with pre-War returns, shows that compulsory temperance in eating was in general more beneficial than harmful in its effects. Although there was a degree of scarcity, we were never faced with famine or actual privation. Credit is due to our people for the loyal manner in which they submitted themselves to these strange and unwelcome restrictions. Without general goodwill it would have been impossible to make the regulations effective.

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