

“Staggering Between Anarchy and Starvation”: An Examination of the Experience of German Civilians under the Allied Blockade of the First World War, 1916-1919

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The First World War went beyond military combat when Britain instituted a naval blockade against Germany in March 1915. Although it took until the last two years of the war for the industrial effects to be felt, the diminution of import capabilities meant that food and goods shortages began within months. The government deflected these shortages from the military onto the German people, which eventually resulted in a dramatic drop in the standard of living. The struggle for daily survival not only damaged national unity, it also bred contempt for the government itself, which was viewed as not sufficiently compensating its people for their forced sacrifices. The combination of these dire circumstances and the reality of military defeat made it unsurprising that revolution broke out in Berlin in early November 1918.

At the outbreak of war in 1914, the British government was well aware that Germany was second only to themselves in terms of dependency on overseas imports to feed the population of 60 million. The British government thus chose to impose an industrial blockade in order to impede the industrial giant's ability to wage war. In retaliation, the German government declared unrestricted submarine warfare on February 4, 1915, which in turn prompted Britain to officially tighten her control of the seas. Although Germany's war industry had a higher productivity than Britain's during the first year of the blockade, food shortages emerged almost immediately, with the first queues forming at Berlin bakeries in October 1914. The early industrial success, in

conjunction with early agricultural and military successes, gave the German state a false sense of security of their ability to thrive under the limitations of the blockade. They paid no heed to suggestions for a comprehensive strategy for civilian food supply. As food shortages became dire enough to necessitate regulatory measures, the government policies were unable to guarantee the allocated amounts. Moreover, the prioritization of military supply and transportation needs meant the plight of civilians escalated at a more rapid pace. 1916 saw Germany's agricultural and industrial strength slowing down for want of raw materials. What became a daily struggle to attain the necessities of life bred contempt for the state. By the final year of the war, civilian starvation and disease were rampant, as was the feeling that the state had betrayed them when saying that all of their sacrifices would bring victory. This hostility grew exponentially under the circumstances of the eight-month extension of the blockade after the end of the military conflict. Thus, while the blockade did eventually succeed in crippling the German war machine, the debilitating effect it had on the legitimacy of the German state itself was far more detrimental in that, by failing to compensate its citizens for their increasing levels of deprivation, the German state had damaged its reputation beyond repair by November 1918.

The increasing difficulty for Germans of all classes to obtain food during the winter of 1916-1917, otherwise known as the *Kohlrübenwinter*, or Turnip Winter, exposed the insufficiencies of the supply system under the blockade. This bred resentment over the lack of compensation for their sacrifices. The potato harvest of 1916 was greatly diminished due to a lack of fertilizers – a key product made unavailable by the blockade – and as a result the population was forced to depend much more heavily upon the turnip for subsistence. Before the war turnips

had been used almost exclusively as fodder, and being forced to depend on it was taken as an insult, especially among agricultural workers. By the end of the winter, the daily caloric intake of civilians decreased from the prewar level of 2,276 to 1,336.¹ Annie Dröege discusses the cuts to rations in her diary on January 7, 1917:

We hear that we are to have only half-a-pound of potatoes per day per person . . . No one can live on half-a-pound of bread and half-a-pound of potatoes per day. We have only one quarter [of a pound] of sausage and one quarter [of a pound] of meat with bone per week and now we are to have only three-quarters [of a pound] of sugar per month. Toilet soap is not to be had at all and a very dreadful scouring soap is three shillings and sixpence a pound.²

The state responded with a system of soup kitchens in urban centers, but it was not lost on the population that this was a poor solution to what was a much larger issue surrounding supply. Author Ernest Gläser also lived through this winter as a young man and later reported his experiences in a novel, titled *Jahrgang, 1902* (Born in 1902). In one passage he describes the war-bread as being “like clay,” stating that it “could well have been used to make models of small men.”³ He then goes on to identify the propaganda slogan of the year as “Better war-bread than no bread.”⁴ Gläser also makes the following statement regarding the

¹ Eric W. Osborne, *Britain's Economic Blockade of Germany, 1914 – 1919* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 161.

² Annie Dröege, *The Diary of Annie's War* (London: Grosvenor House Publishing Limited, 2012), 249-250.

³ Ernst Gläser, *Jahrgang 1902 [Born in 1902]*, trans. Jeffrey Verhey and Roger Chickering (Berlin, 1928, pp. 290. http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=960.

⁴ Gläser, *Jahrgang 1902*, 291.

way the overwhelming preoccupation with survival altered the concerns of the civilians: “Soon the women who stood in the gray lines in front of the stores were talking more about their children’s hunger than their husband’s deaths.”⁵ During the Turnip Winter the pre-existing shortages escalated from an inconvenience to a question of basic survival to civilians whose faith in the government’s ability to alleviate the conditions had faded.

As the war progressed and shortages of raw material imports became more dire, the government further alienated itself to the population by increasing the demands for sacrifice, yet not equitably supplying and distributing the necessities of life in return. The shortage of supplies prompted the government to limit civilian use of scarce goods and to introduce substitute products, such as saccharine in place of sugar. The riding of bicycles was banned in 1916; with all of the rubber from the tires being seized for war materials.⁶ A schedule was introduced dictating certain days of the week on which meat and fat were not to be eaten. When writing about these meatless days on April 18, 1916, Annie Dröege references the joke which emerged that clothes-less days should also be introduced to conserve limited cloth supplies.⁷ The truth behind this joke was that civilians began to question how extensive these regulations would become. Annie Dröege also mentioned the imposition of a “compelled” war loan into which all single men had to invest whatever amount they earned in excess to sixteen shillings per week.⁸

Tensions among the German civilians was further compounded by the failure of the *Kriegsrohstoffabteilung* (War

⁵ Gläser, *Jahrgang 1902*, 292.

⁶ Dröege, *The Diary of Annie’s War*, 221.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 198

⁸ *Ibid.*, 201.

Raw Materials Department) to deliver on its promise to fairly distribution rations. For example, under the rationing system, which was begun in 1915, industrial workers were given additional rations to enable them to work at more efficient rates. Other civilians viewed this favouritism with spite. There was also unofficial inequality in terms of those who had connections in the countryside or the black market through which they could augment their personal supply.⁹ Then of course there was the proportionally high amount of foodstuffs going to the army; while 30% of the grain harvest was allocated to those in the military despite their accounting for only 11.7% of the total population, only 33.3% went to the urban civilians, who constituted 67%.¹⁰ Historian C. Paul Vincent describes these tensions in the following passage from his book *The Politics of Hunger: The Allied Blockade of Germany, 1915 – 1919*: “Civilians were forced to deal with rigid competition for goods and services and an increasingly dehumanizing struggle for survival – an especially hideous struggle because it took place among fellow countrymen.”¹¹ Gläser also describes the effects of this “dehumanizing struggle,” stating simply that “hunger destroyed unity.”¹² Forced to cope with the debilitating shortages and regulations, civilians felt a sense of injustice at the government’s failure to provide an egalitarian system of supply and distribution.

⁹ Thierry Bonzon and Belinda Davis, “Feeding the cities,” in *Capital Cities at War*, eds. Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 320.

¹⁰ N. P. Howard, “The Social and Political Consequences of the Allied Food Blockade of Germany, 1918-19,” *Germany History* 11, no. 2 (April 1993): 163.

¹¹ C. Paul Vincent, *The Politics of Hunger: The Allied Blockade of Germany, 1915 – 1919* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1985), 8.

¹² Gläser, *Jahrgang 1902*, 292.

Germany endured the blockade much longer than economists would have predicted possible, but during the final year of the war major military and domestic breakdowns began to occur at the expense of the government's popular support. Naval historian Eric W. Osborne estimates that by 1918 Germany's agricultural capabilities had diminished to those of the harvest of 1881-1882, producing only 50% of the 1913 levels.¹³ The agricultural issue was compounded by three external factors in 1918: first, America joined the Allied blockade force in April 1917, which meant increased pressure on neutrals to abstain from trade with Germany; second, the much depended on Romanian harvests failed; and third, Ukrainian peasants burned their crops, which were due to be seized by German authorities.¹⁴ The blockade was at last having the strongest effect upon the capabilities of the German war machine, with the Hindenburg program for industrial production showing signs of overheating during this time and the failure of the summer offensives in regaining dominance of the Western Front.

These imminent domestic and military collapses meant further decline into poverty for civilians. By October 1918 the cost of living in Berlin was 243% of what it had been in August 1914.¹⁵ Lack of available consumer goods or food in the shops meant that wages had ceased to be any incentive. Moreover, the mental and physical fatigue caused by the gradual progression into starvation meant that the influenza epidemic, as well as diseases such as tuberculosis, thrived among the civilian population, particularly in urban centers. During the final stage of

¹³ Osborne, *Britain's Economic Blockade of Germany, 1914 – 1919*, 182.

¹⁴ Howard, "The Social and Political Consequences of the Allied Food Blockade of Germany," 165.

¹⁵ Jonathan Manning, "Wages and Purchasing Power," in *Capital Cities at War*, eds. Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 259.

the war Germany suffered from as many civilian casualties as military ones.¹⁶ There was also what Vincent refers to as an “unraveling” of Germany’s moral fabric in the face of the struggle for basic subsistence, stating that it was “not surprising that accounts of girls selling themselves for bars of soap circulated.”¹⁷

By November 1918, the widespread starvation meant that civilian morale was virtually non-existent. As the military downfall became imminent, the government could no longer protect itself behind the distorted view of the war which had dominated propaganda since 1914. The situation was further compounded by addition of the despondency and anger which returning to their families struggling for survival incited in returning soldiers. Vincent sums up the resulting turbulent domestic environment with the following statement: “As the war approached its conclusion, the majority of Germany’s population seemed to be staggering between anarchy and starvation.”¹⁸ It was under these circumstances that a new cabinet was formed on October 3, 1918 with Prince Max von Baden as Chancellor; this was a deliberate “revolution from above” to prevent a popular revolution. Yet, even as the November 11th armistice was arranged and the war officially ended, the anarchy which Vincent referred to came to fruition. On November 9, 1918, revolutionaries demanding the formation of a republic confronted the discredited government in Berlin. The announcement of the Kaiser’s abdication later that day had little to no effect on the rapidly intensifying situation. Ultimately, the revolution in Germany was the culmination of the long waning legitimacy of

¹⁶ Matthias Blum, “Government decisions before and during the First World War and the living standards in Germany during a drastic natural experiment,” *Explorations in Economic History* 48 (2011), 557.

¹⁷ Vincent, *The Politics of Hunger*, 145.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

the state, which had been undermined by its inability to win the war and to provide the necessities of life in exchange for sacrifices made by the civilian population.

Compounding the problems was the continuation of the blockade beyond the end of the military conflict, which exacerbated the suffering of the civilians and meant the new administration of Chancellor Friedrich Ebert did not gain the confidence of the population. Without even the limited avenues of trade that had existed under the blockade, the ability of the state to supply goods and foodstuffs was further undermined and the already dire situation of starvation and disease worsened. The British government chose to disregard the warnings of both the American administration and their own representatives who were still present in Germany that the degree of starvation was too severe to wait, and continued the blockade for the reasons outlined in the following report dated February 16, 1919: “while Germany is still an enemy country, it would be inadvisable to remove the menace of starvation by a too sudden and abundant supply of foodstuffs. This menace is a powerful lever for negotiation at an important moment.”¹⁹

The new German government was keen to make peace with the Allies and so was patient for the first few months, even refusing two trainloads of grain gifted to them by Russia in November 1918, an act which did not please the desperate civilians.²⁰ During the winter of 1918-1919 the daily caloric intake of civilians dropped to an average of 1,000. Coal was also extremely scarce, with only 54% of the previous year’s already

¹⁹ Howard, “The Social and Political Consequences of the Allied Food Blockade of Germany,” 183.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 186.

low supply available.²¹ German civilians were now faced with ever declining living conditions and high unemployment and inflation rates, all this in addition to suffering military defeat in the war which had been the reason for their hardships. The following is a quotation from a Bavarian woman regarding the overall feeling of hopelessness that gripped the population: “It is far worse than the war. During the war we had hope. We knew it must end one day. Now there is no hope.”²² Even in defeat, there was very little sense of relief that the war was over at last because the overwhelming preoccupation with basic survival remained paramount.

Under the circumstances it is not surprising that Germany did not experience the same post-war escalation of birth rates which occurred in Paris and London. The situation of widespread disease and starvation became so dire that on March 7, 1919 the German government at last refused to continue negotiations for a peace settlement until shipments of foodstuffs were sent to Germany, which had been one of the conditions agreed to by both parties in the armistice.²³ The British agreed, but forced the Germans to pay 125 million gold marks for the first shipment alone.²⁴ The blockade only officially came to an end with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles on July 12, 1919. Historian N.P. Howard placed the number of civil deaths during the blockade period at 245, 299 over the 1913 figure.²⁵ During the post-armistice blockade period there was a further drop in the

²¹ Armin Triebel, “Coal and the Metropolis,” in *Capital Cities at War*, eds. Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 201.

²² Vincent, *The Politics of Hunger*, 132.

²³ Osborne, *Britain's Economic Blockade of Germany, 1914 – 1919*, 188.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

²⁵ Howard, “The Social and Political Consequences of the Allied Food Blockade of Germany,” 162.

standard of living for the civilians and the delays to the importation of foodstuffs did not garner popular support for the new government.

Its failure to adequately prevent or remedy the severe deterioration in civilian subsistence levels under the British blockade ultimately had detrimental ramifications for popular support of the Imperial German state. With the rationale that military victory would bring prosperity back to all Germans, the government diverted the shortages of the blockade onto its civilians who began experiencing a struggle for subsistence within the first year of the war. As the sacrifices they were called to make became more extreme, the standard of living was reduced to that of basic survival for many, and resulted in growing contempt at the government's ineffective efforts at equitable distribution of resources. In the final year of the war, as the blockade's effectiveness came to fruition, starvation and disease gripped the population. In the aftermath of military defeat in the war which had been the justification for four years of increasing sacrifice, the state's already fragile legitimacy collapsed.

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* Quotation from title:

C. Paul Vincent, *The Politics of Hunger: The Allied Blockade of Germany, 1915 – 1919* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1985), 22.