

Food and Nutrition (Germany)

By [Belinda Davis](#)

Summary

“Manmade” food shortages arose early in the war on the front line and especially on the German home front. Hundreds of thousands suffered malnutrition and worse. Attendant protest quickly revealed deep political implications that influenced the prosecution of the war, evoking lasting public demand for government intervention on behalf of the German consumers, and contributing to the downfall of the regime.

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Introduction

[Food and the nutrition](#) of soldiers and civilians alike was a prominent issue in the [German Empire](#) for nearly the entirety of the war.¹ Historians have long acknowledged the existence of shortages, particularly of food, in the second half of the war, and have noted regular economic protest in turn.² But from early on, a food crisis was integral to the experience of war, on the front line and especially across the home front. Shortages of foodstuffs, including the most basic necessities, contributed directly and indirectly to hundreds of thousands of wartime deaths. Moreover, the protest was as much social and political as economic. The shortages and attendant concerns about the maldistribution of goods exacerbated deep societal divisions, such as those between [urban](#) and [rural](#) dwellers, even as they created surprising new alliances and brought about a powerful understanding of Germans as “consumers.” Officials at all levels of [government](#) felt forced to adopt broad (if contradictory and otherwise limitedly efficacious) policies of rationing, price ceilings and other unprecedented means of intervention on behalf of consumer interests. These policies

ultimately legitimated the demand for intervention more than they legitimated the government itself.³ Such issues were thus central to the political as well as social and economic history of the war in Germany, carrying significant ramifications for the Weimar Republic and beyond. The experience of scarcity contributed to the construction of a particular and prominent narrative of German history in the 20th century; the ability to consume remained tied to notions of who was a German, and how a German lived and ought to live. The following sections will consider food shortages from early in the war, and government efforts to intervene in the crisis. The article will continue to demonstrate how such policies raised new expectations concerning food distribution – while failing to fulfill these expectations. It concludes with a discussion of the broader and lasting implications of the severe shortages.

War and Food Shortages

Already on the eve of war, the nature of food production, import and distribution had led to precarious circumstances in the German Empire. Urbanization and other demographic shifts meant that the population was dependent on imports for one quarter of overall food supplies. At the same time, cheap imports allowed many urban Germans to survive on low wages. When in 1911 politicians intervened with a new tariff agreement that protected especially large German landowners but raised the price of bread, those living off a low income in the cities grew furious. While inflation persisted as a problem from the turn of the century, the cost of this basic food rose far more quickly still, exacerbating rifts between urban and rural residents, as well as regional animosities. The [Social Democratic](#) challenge to the new tariff policy contributed to the party's unprecedented 1912 electoral wins in parliament. The politics of food had become "big politics" even before the belligerent nations had declared war.

The rising attention paid to consumer issues spiked astronomically with the onset of hostilities. The declaration of war on 4 August 1914 brought on the beginning of shortages of many basic goods, producing entrenched crises that only intensified over the course of the war, seasonal and other fluctuations notwithstanding. There were various reasons for the shortages. Enemy nations no longer provided customary supplies, such as Russian (and later American) wheat – though German landowners had exported much of their rye harvest to [Russia](#) just before hostilities set in. British leaders imposed the sea embargo they had long threatened, cutting off provisions e.g. of Chilean saltpeter (fixed nitrogen), used as a crop fertilizer as well as for military production.⁴ [France](#) and [Britain](#) pressured [neutral](#) continental powers to withhold exports such as [Danish](#) dairy products, contributing to a critical deficiency of dietary fats in the Reich. German officials had not planned for consumer shortages,

preferring to count on a brief and victorious war. Once the war began, civilian officials deferred to military demand, which rapidly diminished domestic agricultural production through conscription of fixed nitrogen, draft horses and farm labor. Food shortages caused the most desperate and enduring crises of basic goods. Scarcity of consumer necessities such as fuel for cooking and heating, however, was interrelated with these shortages and intensified the negative effects for many Germans.

Shortages hit individuals on the battle and home fronts with varying degrees of severity, depending on socioeconomic position, geography, and other factors.⁵ Still, grave scarcities were integral to the German experience of the war overall, from early on. The deficiencies of the first months escalated to crisis level by early 1915, as a complete lack of potatoes in some parts of the country followed months of severe wheat shortage. Frustration and fear rose to the fore. Civilians often had to spend hours standing in line (“dancing the Polonaise,” as some bitterly described it), waiting for goods that frequently ran out before one’s turn. Such circumstances regularly caused disputes among customers, and between consumers and shopkeepers. The police themselves grew fearful of the constant unrest, which they struggled to control. This daily experience dragged on for years, as the ability to obtain basic goods continued to diminish as a secular trend, and the effects grew cumulative and lasting. Likewise, soldiers began to express their dissatisfaction. They deplored the limited rations and the expectation that they should live off conquered territory. (Where they did, the indigenous populations, from [Belgium](#) to Polish Russia, suffered great privations themselves.) [Infantrymen](#) voiced rising resentment of the distinction between their own meager rations and those of officers. Finally, they decried the hunger their families back home suffered proclaiming that officials had broken the unwritten agreement to care for these families while they risked their lives on the front line.

Authorities Intervene

The highest civilian and military authorities grew concerned that they would have to resolve the continuing crisis for numerous reasons.⁶ Evidence of broad and sustained popular discontent badly damaged the officials’ [propaganda war](#). Conversely, they feared, it would nourish the propaganda of the German enemies. In this “[total war](#),” authorities had come to rely more and more on popular cooperation at every level. Prussian officials declared a state of siege with the onset of hostilities that was followed throughout the Empire, effecting an increase in police patrols across the country, and setting down a host of rules dictating the behavior of German subjects. Nonetheless, it soon became clear that force alone would suffice, neither to calm public unrest nor to elicit the compliance necessary to successfully prosecute the unprecedentedly demanding war. In turn, the authorities’ acknowledgement of

the increasing privations motivated (especially urban) civilians and even soldiers to continue their angry appeals.

German civilian and military officials at every level tried to respond positively to consumer demand. Such responses sometimes came at the expense of constituencies that typically had the officials' ear, such as big landowners; small farmers felt slighted, too. Military authorities issued strategic orders on the basis of gaining access to the fruits of fertile farmland, visible in shifting war policy toward [Romania](#) in 1915 and in the cessation of hostilities with [Ukraine](#) and Russia in early 1918. Authorities began issuing unprecedented orders to control the domestic price and distribution of various goods in the interests of the consumers. The Federal Council thus imposed conditions of production on bread as early as November 1914, and set wholesale price ceilings on potatoes, particularly to accommodate poorer consumers. By January 1915, the new Imperial Grain Authority had banned farmers from foddering their grain and had issued ration coupons for bread. Two months later, Reich officials ordered farmers to slaughter their livestock in unusually high numbers, and confiscated the potatoes allocated for feeding the animals for civilian use. By October, the powerful military High Command in the Marches regulated civilian butter prices.

By 1916, civilian and military authorities alike issued measure after measure, all of which were intended to ameliorate consumer access to food. In May, Prussian officials launched what was designed as a comprehensive approach to the increasingly volatile circumstances, including the establishment of a War Food Office under the auspices of the Prussian War Ministry. One can hardly overstate how extraordinary these new kinds of official interventions were, particularly for the populations they served. Yet this was only the beginning of a seemingly never-ending succession of measures at every level. By the time of the historically frigid "Turnip Winter" of 1916-17, both rations and price controls had been implemented for virtually all food items, as well as for coal and other fuels. As the new effective "military dictator," Supreme Army Commander [Paul von Hindenburg \(1847-1934\)](#) explicitly promised firm control of the domestic food supply and distribution.⁷

New Concepts of Food Distribution - and Old Practices

The measures implemented by the Supreme Army Command brought with them different notions concerning "just" and "fair" distribution. Not everyone responded to the measures in the same way, or chose to abide by these principles. Those who were in a position to do so frequently expressed their deep discontent by "opting out," regardless of potential legal sanctions. Farmers, distributors, and retailers often withheld foodstuffs, or they delivered them noncompliant with the official economy, thereby creating an underground economy or "black market." Small farmers protested their inability to produce food, excoriating officials

for expropriating their resources, then setting the prices on their goods; many lamented their own malnutrition. Even as the war shifted the economic standing of many consumers, those who could afford it paid the price and hoarded supplies. Lower officials often gave voice to popular views of regional animosity, amplifying the tensions. Residents of towns and smaller cities regularly joined their rural counterparts in attacking Reich-level officials for favoring Berlin, though this did little to assuage the antagonisms among them. Württemberg authorities declared that food produced within the province had to stay in the province. Ruhr officials defied imperial edicts to give local farmers permission to turn their potatoes into schnapps, as reported by furious Bremeners in a contemporary account.⁸ Even the new “reform” chancellor from Bavaria, [Georg Graf von Hertling \(1843-1919\)](#), indulged his home province’s withholding of foodstuffs in 1917.⁹ Arguably, strategies like these exacerbated the bigger crisis. Longstanding antagonisms between Bavaria and Prussia deepened over the food question. On the battle front, no less, soldiers expressed deep resentment that food quantity, quality and distribution differed by rank and also by the fighters’ geographic origin. Bavarian soldiers on the [Western Front](#) routinely proclaimed the Prussian infantrymen they fought alongside a far greater enemy than the French.¹⁰ While the difference in rations allocated to the respective armies (Bavarian, Prussian etc.) was not the root cause of this particular ill will, it did fan the flames.

The food crisis not only aggravated existing social tensions, but also brought about new ones. Production-based class divisions deepened, even as conditions blurred standard categories of class. Yet munitions manufacturers, despised for example in [France](#), were the object of charges of “[war profiteering](#)” less often than food wholesalers.¹¹ At certain moments, it seemed that soldiers’ wives, female munitions workers and even mothers of large families were held responsible for taking food from other “deserving Germans.” [Prisoners of war](#) ate food that “rightfully” belonged to German nationals. Political groupings both more and less mainstream renewed strategies of identifying ethnic non-Germans as “inner enemies.” They propagated the idea that ethnic Poles and Russians living in Germany stole bread that Germans needed. Many Germans claimed that [Jews were responsible](#) for the unavailability and overpricing of goods. Heightened feelings of ethnic enmity persisted long after the war had come to an end.

While the controlled economy did not work well, it is impossible to say with certainty if the general situation would have been better without it. Goods frequently disappeared from the market in places where price ceilings were set. Even Reich-level measures were only minimally successful. Contemporaries joked mirthlessly, “*Man Karten Dir verspricht – Doch Ware kriegst Du nicht!*”¹² At triple the pre-war rate, the legal price of beans in Hanover in

January 1916 was still a bargain, compared to most foods – but most Hanoverians could not get them.¹³ In Berlin, the black market price for meat increased from just over one mark on the eve of war, to over twenty-five marks by September 1918.¹⁴ Before the war, Rhenish workers went from spending an already high average of twenty-six marks a month on food (which at that point was over half their income) to over sixty marks mid-war. The limit in increase in practice depended solely on what was available to be spent, at the expense of other necessary goods, and on what there was available to sell.¹⁵

Failures of Policy and Practice

Aggregate figures are important but not sufficient to understand the physical effects of the scarcity and inaccessibility of basic goods.¹⁶ Hundreds of thousands died in direct and indirect consequence of these shortages.¹⁷ They contracted tuberculosis, pneumonia and other lung conditions that thrived in underfed, under-heated and overworked bodies, forced to live in overcrowded apartments; Recklinghausen authorities explicitly acknowledged the connection.¹⁸ This susceptibility also informed the uncontrollable spread of [influenza in 1918](#), as well as cholera and typhus epidemics. Approximately 175,000 German civilians died of flu during the final months of the war.¹⁹ Older Germans who suffered these conditions were particularly likely to die from them.²⁰ Among those most susceptible to illness were women and [children](#) from the urban working class and also of the urban lower middle class. (Contrary to contemporary and long-lived claims, however, the latter did not suffer more than workers, in absolute terms.) Deaths among female German civilians rose from under 468,000 in 1916, to over 523,000 in 1917, to over 644,000 in 1918, which marks a significant rise in absolute terms, and also in relation to the increased mortality of civilian men, though their mortality rate also increased significantly.²¹ Altogether, the mortality rate rose from 1.5 percent to 2.6 percent per annum in the course of the war among Bochum residents; death on the front line accounts for only about 0.6 percent of these numbers.²² In turn, this does not differentiate those whose deaths on the front line may have been hastened by malnutrition, along with other debilitating conditions they faced in the trenches.

Dying from scarcity-related conditions was not the only serious consequence. Children particularly suffered long-term direct and indirect mental and physical effects from the scarcities. Vitamin D deficiencies caused widespread bone deformations among children. Questionable food sources outside of rural areas caused a host of enduring intestinal disorders, cynically termed “turnip disease” after the swede turnip (or rutabaga) the hated fibrous tuber that was sometimes the only easily available food. Many disorders were the

result of willful malice, whether in the form of watered-down milk or adulterated and even poisonous substances sold as egg powder.

Although it seems most Germans demanded some government control of foodstuffs and although most had limited “connections” (“*Vitamin B*,” for *Beziehungen*) – a Christian trade unionist in Wuppertal defiantly declared to officials, “*Wir alle leben vom Schleichhandel, weil wir sonst verhungern würden.*”²³ While it was impossible for most to survive on the open market alone, it was rarely any easier to live off the controlled economy. Publisher [Helmut von Gerlach \(1866-1935\)](#) points out the innate paradox of the situation: “Der Schleichhandel ist die normale Form des Warenverkehrs geworden.”²⁴ In relatively well-off Herne, “normal rations” in 1916 covered only a quarter of the daily dietary fats required by an average adult, according to scientists’ new findings.²⁵ There is evidence that some people, for example those who were institutionalized and were living entirely off official and available rations actually starved.²⁶ In April 1917, a medical officer in Wiesbaden found that a loss of sixty pounds in healthy adults since August 1914 was “no rarity,” even among those who made use of every means possible.”²⁷ The dire circumstances were a consequence not only of the inefficacy official measures: rather, they emerged in part as a result of the measures themselves. Initially heralded as the “dictator of the pantry,” General von Hindenburg divided the population according to a “productivity principle,” measured in relation to direct military contribution. In 1916, he stated: “*Wer nicht arbeitet [for the new military requisites] der soll nicht essen.*”²⁸

Food Shortages and Their Broad Implications

Paradoxically, official measures were far more effective in spurring the sense of the right of every German consumer (whether military or civilian) to demand the sufficient supply of basic goods than in assuring a supply or in achieving authorities’ legitimation. The result was to create general acclaim – at least this was the publically expressed sentiment – for the appropriateness of “equitable” distribution, guaranteed “affordable” prices, and even the elimination of the “middle man.”²⁹ In 1915, Ruhr residents complained of “*Anarchie auf dem Warenmarkt*,” — by which they referred to market pricing.³⁰ Before long, it had become rare for Germans to publically denounce official intervention in the market as “war socialism,” as they had earlier.³¹ Whereas such guiding principles had been unimaginable to all but a few Social Democrats before the war, they now took on lasting legitimacy for many. The notion of a “planned economy” broadly speaking was a new concept, in Germany and for many of the belligerent nations; a certain level of intervention grew into a lasting feature of European

national economies. At the same time, it is not surprising that, in practice, farmers balked at the notion that authorities would tell them what to plant and how to sell it, for the sake of “the German consumer.”³²

Yet this allegedly powerful consumer ultimately found the government to be “in control of nothing” and even to have sanctioned profiteering, suggesting that people who did not follow the rules should be put into prison, while those who did belonged “in the nuthouse.”³³ By 1918, the great majority of the population no longer believed in the officials’ repeated promises. However, many did not direct their disapproval at the controls: it was aimed at controls that did not work, or that were not exercised according to principles that were perceived as having been agreed upon. The ongoing government efforts, ineffectual as they often were, may well have helped to prevent a “revolutionary” uprising until the final year of the war, despite the [Russian example](#). Conversely, in the final year of the war, a coalescing popular sense that officials could or would not ensure the most basic needs of the German population contributed powerfully to the critical mass of unrest among soldiers, sailors and civilians. This broad discord resulted in the [German November revolution](#), leading not only to Germany’s decisive withdrawal from hostilities, but also the fall of the monarchy.

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Notes

1. For an extended version of this discussion see Davis, Belinda: Konsum im ersten Weltkrieg, in: Haupt, Heinz-Gerhard and Torp, Claudius (eds.): Die Konsumgesellschaft in Deutschland 1890-1990, Frankfurt 2009, pp. 232-249; for a broader context see Davis, Belinda: Home Fires Burning. Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin, Chapel Hill 2000. [↑](#)
2. Compare e.g. Kocka, Jürgen: Klassengesellschaft im Krieg. Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1914-1918, Göttingen 1973; Feldman, Gerald: Army, Industry and Labor in Germany 1914-1918, Providence 1992; also Reulecke, Jürgen: Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Arbeiterbewegung im Rheinisch-Westfälischen Industriegebiet, in: Reulecke, Jürgen (ed.): Arbeiterbewegung an Rhein und Ruhr. Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung in Rheinland-Westfal, Wuppertal 1974, pp. 205-239. [↑](#)
3. Contrast Feldman, Gerald: War Economy and Controlled Economy. The Discrediting of “Socialism” in Germany During World War I, in: Schroeder, Hans-Joachim (ed.): Confrontation and Cooperation. Germany and the United States in the Era of World War I, 1900-1924, Providence 1993, pp. 229-52; Bessel, Richard: Germany after the First World War, Oxford 1993. [↑](#)

4. Compare on the blockade of provisions, in terms of its deadly effects, its significance as a form of warfare and its role in spurring long-lasting German state planning, Vincent, Paul C.: *The Politics of Hunger. The Allied Blockade of Germany, 1914-1919*, Athens 1985; Offer, Avner: *The Blockade of Germany and the Strategy of Starvation*, in: Chickering, Roger (ed.): *Great War, Total War. Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914-1918*, Cambridge 2000, pp. 169-188; Feldman, Army, *Industry and Labor* 1992. ↑
5. Compare e.g. Ziemann, Benjamin: *Front und Heimat. Ländliche Kriegserfahrungen im südlichen Bayern 1914-1923*, Essen 1997; Roerkohl, Anne: *Hungerblockade und Heimatfront. Die kommunale Lebensmittelversorgung in Westfalen während des Ersten Weltkrieges*, Stuttgart 1991; Davis, *Home Fires Burning* 2000; Regulski, Christoph: *Klippfisch und Steckrüben. Die Lebensmittelversorgung der Einwohner Frankfurts am Main im Ersten Weltkrieg 1914 – 1918. Eine Studie zur deutschen Wirtschafts- und Innenpolitik in Kriegszeiten*, Wiesbaden 2012. ↑
6. Officials collected reports on the state of morale from the home front as well as the battle front. Compare *Monatsberichte*, Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde, 15.01 Reichsministerium des Innern, Repositur 77 (BAL 15.01 Rep. 77); as well as reports on cities, such as the *Stimmungsberichte* held in Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv Potsdam, Provinz Brandenburg, Repositur 30, Berlin C, Titel 35, 94-95 Polizei Präsidium Berlin (BHLA PPB); compare to Volker Ullrich: *Kriegsalltag. Hamburg im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Köln 1982. ↑
7. Davis, *Home Fires Burning* 2000, pp. 114-136; also Roerkohl, *Hungerblockade* 1991, p. 162 *passim*. ↑
8. *Kartoffel-Enthüllung*, in: *Bremer Bürger Zeitung*, 10 August 1917. ↑
9. *Alles mogelt*, in: *Welt am Montag*, 24 December 1917. ↑
10. Ziemann, *Front und Heimat* 1997, on Bavarian soldiers discussing their Prussian counterparts. ↑
11. Bonzon, Thierry and Davis, Belinda: *Feeding the Cities*, in: Winter, Jay and Jean-Louis Robert (eds.): *Capital Cities at War. Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919*, Cambridge 1996, pp. 305-341. ↑
12. "You are promised ration cards – but goods you will not actually get!" [translated by author.] Image, Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, File 1578, no date [probably 1915], no photographer listed. ↑
13. Boll, Friedhelm: *Massenbewegungen in Niedersachsen, 1906-1920. Eine sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu den unterschiedlichen Entwicklungstypen Braunschweig und Hannover*, Bonn 1981, p. 195. ↑
14. Demps, Lorenz and Materna, Ingo (eds.): *Geschichte Berlins von den Anfängen bis 1945*, Berlin 1987, p. 540. ↑

15. Zimmermann, Waldemar: Die Veränderungen der Einkommens- und Lebensverhältnisse der Deutschen Arbeiter durch den Krieg, in: Meerwarth, Rudolf et al. (eds.): Die Einwirkung des Krieges auf Bevölkerungsbewegung. Einkommen, und Lebenshaltung in Deutschland, Stuttgart 1932, pp. 281-474. [↑](#)
16. Offer, Avner: The First World War. An Agrarian Interpretation, Oxford 1989. [↑](#)
17. Compare Vincent, Politics of Hunger 1985. [↑](#)
18. Hartewig, Karin: Das unberechenbare Jahrzehnt. Bergarbeiter und ihre Familien im Ruhrgebiet 1914-1924, Munich 1993, p. 33. [↑](#)
19. Bessel, Germany 1993, p. 39; also Bumm, Franz (ed.): Deutschlands Gesundheitsverhältnisse unter dem Einfluss des Weltkrieges, Stuttgart 1928; Grotjahn, Alfred: Erlebtes und Erstrebtes. Erinnerungen eines sozialistischen Arztes, Berlin 1932. [↑](#)
20. Bessel, Germany 1993, p. 40. [↑](#)
21. Compare Statistisches Jahrbuch für das deutsche Reich 1924/25, pp. 44-49. [↑](#)
22. Hartewig, Bergbau 1993, p. 27. [↑](#)
23. "We all live off the black market, or else we would starve." Cited in Reulecke, Der erste Weltkrieg 1974, p. 221. [translated by author.] [↑](#)
24. "The black market has become the normal form of traffic in goods." Cited in Alles mogelt 1917. [translated by author.] [↑](#)
25. Roerkohl, Hungerblockade 1991, p. 291. [↑](#)
26. Davis, Home Fires Burning 2000, p. 187 passim. [↑](#)
27. Cited in Bessel, Germany 1993, p. 40. [↑](#)
28. "Whoever does not work, should not eat." Memo, Paul Hindenburg to Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, 13 Sept. 1916, cited in Tibertius, Richard and Joachim Tibertius: Die Arbeiterfrage, eine Kernfrage des Weltkrieges. Ein Beitrag zur Erklärung des Kriegsausgangs, Berlin 1920, pp. 106-107; also Bauer, Max: Der Große Krieg in Feld und Heimat. Erinnerungen und Betrachtungen, Tübingen 1921, pp. 153-155. [translated by author] [↑](#)
29. Davis, Home Fires Burning 2000, pp.124-129. [↑](#)
30. "...anarchy in the marketplace." Cited in Hartewig, Bergbau 1993, p. 153. [translated by author.] [↑](#)
31. Compare Groener, Wilhelm: Lebenserinnerungen, Göttingen 1957, p. 551; see also Sozialismus von Heute, in: Deutsche Tageszeitung, 9 December 1916. [↑](#)
32. Compare the "Hindenburg Donation," in which farmers were to make "voluntary" donations to increase munitions worker rations. Roerkohl, Hungerblockade 1991, p. 162. [↑](#)
33. Gerlach, Helmut, citing popular opinion column in: Die Welt am Montag, 28. December 1917; also Neukölln: Zu Marmaladenverteilung, in: Vorwärts, 30 November 1917 [↑](#)

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GND Subject Headings

[Deutschland ; Weltkrieg \[1914-1918\] ; Lebensmittelversorgung](#)

LC Subject Headings

[World War, 1914-1918--Food supply--Germany](#)

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[Guerre mondiale \(1914-1918\) ; Alimentation ; Allemagne](#)

Key Person(s)

[Gerlach, Hellmut von](#); [Hindenburg, Paul von](#); [Hertling, Georg, Graf von](#)

Key Location(s)

[Berlin](#); [Bochum](#); [Hanover](#); [Recklinghausen](#); [Herne](#); [Wiesbaden](#)

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Author(s)

[Belinda Davis](#)

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