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# Food and Nutrition (East Central Europe)

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The German occupation of the north-western territories of the tsarist empire was characterized by a strong tendency to exploit local natural resources and manpower. In particular, the occupied territories represented an essential source of foodstuffs for the German home front hit by the blockade. The harshness of German requisitions and a regime of control over foodstuff supplies caused increasing shortages of food and eventually famine and starvation in the local population. Foodstuff supply remained critical even after the emergence of the nation states in 1917/1918.

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# Introduction

The German occupation represented for the north-western territories of the Russian Empire a period of extreme material hardship and deprivation. While the Allied blockade of Germany hit the local economy generally, its effects on food supplies proved to be much tougher than in other occupied areas such as Belgium. A country strongly dependent on food imports, Belgium staved off a dire food crisis by means of the constant cooperation of centralized local relief with relief agencies from neutral countries such as the Netherlands and the United States. Not only was relief in the north-western territories of the tsarist empire much more fragmentary, but the German attitude was also characterized by a tendency to massively exploit local natural resources and manpower. Essential for supplying Germany's home front, the occupied territories were eventually pushed to the edge of economic devastation and famine by a rapacious occupation policy.

# **Economic Exploitation and Food Shortages**

From the very early stage of the war, foodstuffs were the object of rationing and requisitions both in the territories occupied by the German army and in those still part of the tsarist empire. However, it was during the German occupation that food represented the commodity whose disappearance caused the most severe suffering and left the civil population in an increasingly critical situation.

#### Foodstuff Control and Requisitions in the Government General of Warsaw

The territories of tsarist Poland reorganized in the Government General of Warsaw (GGW) were the first ones to end up in German hands and to experience strict control of foodstuff supplies. Requisitions were the main tool employed from the very beginning of the occupation. As early as May 1915, a centralized cereal requisition system was created throughout the GGW. Any trade in wheat, rye or barley was prohibited. Later that year, a similar approach was adopted to handle stocks of potatoes, peas and oats. Whereas by 1917/1918 the volume of cereals for export to Germany grew – up to 30 percent of the crop – only about 40 percent of cereals produced in the occupied land was left for personal use and free trade (see table 1). Even more burdensome was the overall balance of requisitioned potatoes. Throughout the occupation years, only 36 percent of the total local potato production (5,966,061 g) remained in the GGW.<sup>[1]</sup>

Crops left in the GGW were subject to strict control. Even if the authorities' discretion remained the basic norm regulating foodstuff management, cereal distribution was superintended by a new institution – the National Cereal Department – entrusted to manage cereal supplies to the army and civilians in strict observance of introduced norms. In order to guarantee cereal supply, limitations on the use of bread, and a bread-card system were introduced at the beginning of the occupation. Villagers and city dwellers had to bake bread using lower quality cereals or potato starch. By December 1915, the daily bread ration in cites was set at 145g. No less than 15 percent of barley flour and 35 percent of potato starch was to be used for bread baking. In the course of months, the quality of bread got increasingly worse. In January 1916, the proportion of barley flour and potato starch grew to 30 percent.<sup>[2]</sup> Irrespective of a short-lived betterment in late summer, daily rations and their energy value diminished progressively in autumn when they fell to 120g, and beetroots were introduced as an additional ingredient.

Neither did meat avoid centralized control. A monopoly on meat was introduced in January 1916, along with the prohibition of free trade.<sup>[3]</sup> Until November 1918, requisitioned meat was more than 400,000 head of cattle, 100,000 pigs and 26,500 sheep. A huge amount of meat was sent to Germany. Between May and November 1918, the number of exported animals exceeded 112,200 calves, 21,370 pigs and 5,000 sheep. The weekly meat rations for civilians in the GGW reflected the hierarchy of wartime society. While soldiers were due 1,000g, in cities the ration fluctuated between 80 and 120g. The ration in Warsaw – which was essentially blockaded, with incoming traffic stringently searched for hidden food – diminished to 50g per week by the end of 1916.<sup>[4]</sup>

Even if no centralized control system was introduced, as in the case of meat and crops, all other foodstuffs were subject to requisitions. In some cases, the quantity of requisitioned items was impressive. In the second half of 1916, for example, one requisition unit in Kalisz reported having sent to Germany almost 25 million eggs.<sup>[5]</sup>

Following the socio-political changes encapsulated in the act of 5 November 1916, the centralized supply system eventually split. Accordingly, in 1917, responsibility for supplies for civilians was handed over to Polish administration. The measure proved to be effective in reducing smuggling and in improving distribution effectiveness. An agreement on the ban on cereal exports to Germany was signed in July.<sup>[6]</sup> In December 1917, the Ministry of Supplies, the Regency Council of the Kingdom of Poland, became responsible for the supply administration throughout Poland. While aiming to create an effective supply control and distribution within the administrated territory, the ministry committed to fight against speculation, expand its control over the trade in staple food and possibly erase the economic border between Polish territories under German and Austro-Hungarian occupation. At the end of April 1918, the ministry was abolished, its agenda being taken over by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The overall situation, however, did not improve. Due to the increasing lack of adequate supplies, daily bread rations fell to 80g per person.<sup>[7]</sup> On the whole, the average daily calorific intake fell from about 3,000g in 1914 to less than 900g in the spring of 1918.<sup>[8]</sup> Compared to the pre-war period, the daily food ration in Warsaw had diminished by about 75 percent. While riots fuelled by despair and hunger continued,<sup>[9]</sup> starvation became widespread and visible in the streets of Warsaw.<sup>[10]</sup>

Year	For the National Cereal Department (q)		For Personal Use	Total (q)
	Total	% sent to Germany	(q)	
1915/191	62,743,000	40	1,759,000	4,502,000
1916/191	72,685,400	25.5	1,781,600	4,467,000
1917/191	8 1,919,600	52.5	1,393,400	3,313,000

## Foodstuff Control and Requisitions in Ober Ost

The situation in Ober Ost was even harsher. Throughout the first year of war, when the front line was still mobile in east Prussia and the bordering region, the Russian and German armies adopted foodstuff requisitions with increasing frequency. Their scope remained limited, however, and a sum for requisitioned food was often paid. Rapid price increases became especially perceivable in towns.

It was, however, the advance of the German army in the east that made the situation increasingly difficult. Over the first months of German occupation, food requisitions were of a brutal and unsystematic nature. As in the GGW, troops took food from farmers with no pretence of eventual repayment, as no receipts were handed out. After the seizure of Vilnius on 18 September 1915, the German military authorities issued an order under which all shops, hotels, restaurants and cafés had to declare within three days the foodstuffs they had in their storerooms. While larger shops were ordered to supply the German army with foodstuffs, Vilnius City Hall had to deliver 110 puds (c. 1,760kg) per day.<sup>[12]</sup> A new order was issued just week later. All city dwellers were compelled to declare foodstuffs stored at home exceeding a total weight of three puds (c. 48kg) irrespective of the number of people in the household.<sup>[13]</sup>

With the stabilization of the front line and the establishment of a centralized military administration, requisitions became an institutionalized practice responding to the view of Ober Ost as a territorial unit for the comprehensive colonial exploitation of land and people. A special section (VII/a) of the central administration run by Heinrich Yorck von Wartenburg (1861-1923) undertook the direction and supervision of agriculture, even though the authorities and the military continued to manage requisitions with a high degree of discretion. Yorck aimed at rationalizing the requisition system, collecting, almost maniacally, statistics on the land. Drawing on the collected information, quotas determined the quantity of grain, milk, eggs and animals farmers had to deliver according to strict deadlines. Estates whose owners had fled or whose holdings were judged insufficiently productive became centres in which food production was directly managed by the occupation forces. After manors were seized, farmers were rounded up and drafted to work there in addition to looking after their own farms. Farms were equally affected.<sup>[14]</sup>

Product	Requisitioned	Destroyed	Total
Cattle (number)	140,000	2,000	142,000
Sheep, chickens, pigs, geese (number)	730,000	37,000	767,000
Cereals (puds)	4,320,000	1,700,000	6,020,000
Seeds (puds)	40,000	16,000	56,000
Root vegetables (kg)	140,000	98,000	238,000
Potatoes (kg)	10,733,300*		10,733,300*
Fruits and berries (kg)	2,479,800*		2,479,800*
Eggs (number)	12,565,826*		12,565,826*
Jam (kg)	10,733,300*		10,733,300*

\* Amount exported to Germany for military and civil purposes.

Table 2: Food Products Requisitioned and Destroyed during the German Occupation<sup>[15]</sup>

Nonetheless, the whole system remained highly discretionary and led by improvisation: in three years of occupation, no general norm for requisitions was ever established. Lack of fertilizers, and massive requisitions of instruments and horses, which reduced the stock by 30 percent, catastrophically impacted local farming.<sup>[16]</sup> As, in 1916-1917, the economic situation in Germany became progressively more critical, the quantity and type of requisitioned foodstuffs in farms and families grew. According to the German official data, locals were left with less than 40 percent of the wheat and 19 percent of the potatoes cultivated on occupied land.<sup>[17]</sup>

Food rationing – which the regime introduced in order to at least limit the humanitarian catastrophe – just worsened the general situation, paving the way to famine.

Throughout the occupation years, the German authorities increasingly limited the quantity of foodstuffs private people and organizations could legally store. By 1917, permitted reserve food supplies in Vilnius were as low as 3 to 5kg per person. The remaining supplies were to be given over to German army stores.<sup>[18]</sup> Due to extensive requisitions, animal fats became almost unobtainable.<sup>[19]</sup>

Restrictions hit especially major cities where strict limitations on movement outside the urban area made providing supplies extremely difficult. In Vilnius, for instance, potatoes had to be supplied by the German military and sold exclusively in stores managed by the city hall or authorized shops. The effectiveness of adopted measures remained far from satisfactory. The lack of adequate storage premises quite often led to potato rot.<sup>[20]</sup> By late 1915, queuing in front of shops and stores became for many the only way to obtain potatoes.<sup>[21]</sup> Along with other items, however, potatoes were rationed. By July 1916, 500g of potatoes and 160g of grain could be bought daily.<sup>[22]</sup> Strict rationing was introduced for bread, as well. In December 1915, bread began to be sold in Vilnius by means of a card system.<sup>[23]</sup> Nonetheless, the system remained far from satisfying the needs of the population. Due to grain requisitions, bread was baked using even grass and beetroots, which often rendered it hardly edible. Moreover, rations per person progressively decreased from 250g in late 1915 to 100g in May 1917.<sup>[24]</sup>

Product (one pound)	Price in 1915/1916	Price in 1916/1917
Rye flour	0.20-0.30	1-2
Grains	0.35-0.50	1-2
Sugar	0.35-0.50	1-2
Potatoes	4-10	30-40

Table 3: Increase in Food Prices in Vilnius (prices in roubles)<sup>[25]</sup>

From the very beginning of the occupation, famine occasionally hit villages and small towns. Requisitions made it necessary for people to eat whatever they found. In the village Daugeliškis, people baked bread out of sawdust, straw and musk.<sup>[26]</sup> Bad feeding led to the emergence and spread of intestinal problems which occasionally ended in death.<sup>[27]</sup> Famine reached its peak in the winter of 1916-1917 in Vilnius. High food prices (see table 3), the ban on trade and importations from the countryside, drastically low salaries,<sup>[28]</sup> and extremely limited foodstuff availability led to a severe rise in death rates. According to one estimate, between November 1916 and May 1917, in the city of fewer than 140,000 people, at least 4,325 people died from famine and epidemics.<sup>[29]</sup> While, prior to the outbreak of war, death rates in Vilnius were 2-3 percent a year, in April 1917 they exceeded 8 percent. The general mortality rate significantly dropped only in late summer.<sup>[30]</sup>

With the emergence of the Lithuanian nation state in February 1918, the situation did not change abruptly. Even though foodstuff reserves mostly guaranteed minimal sustenance to city dwellers and refugees, continuing limitations to freedom of movement and importations, and difficult communication between relief actors and the different bureaucratic entities managing public life again prevented foodstuffs from becoming fully available.<sup>[31]</sup>

# Social Catastrophe and Response to Food Policy

## **Relief Committees**

Difficulties with the food supply compelled committees to search for alternative sources. From the very beginning of the war, public canteens where people could obtain low cost or free soup and bread, remained one of the main supports for the needy population in towns and larger cities. In the GGW, the General Relief Council (*Rada Główna Opiekuńcza*) took the lion's share in food relief. With the financial support of various Polish organizations working outside the occupied area – such as the Aid Committee for the Kingdom of Poland (*Komitet Niesienia Pomocy w Królestwie Polskim*) in Poznań and the committee run by Nobel prize winner Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846-1916) in Vevey, Switzerland – the council delivered foodstuffs to the needy, and organized soup kitchen networks. By 1916, about 100,000 people had lunch daily at public canteens. The number of recipients was even higher in Łódź.<sup>[32]</sup>

In Vilnius, a public canteen network run by city charities and relief organizations began to spread at the beginning of the war. By 1917, however, public canteens could deliver only about 35,000 rations of soup and bread daily.<sup>[33]</sup> Soup rations could only guarantee mere subsistence: an average soup portion consisted of 20g of grains, 43g of flour and 250g of potatoes. According to rough calculations, the highest daily ration of food in Vilnius did not exceed 800 kcal a day.<sup>[34]</sup> Supply difficulties stimulated committees to somehow integrate official sources of foodstuffs. Relief committees organized vegetable gardens in which people receiving relief often served as an unpaid workforce.<sup>[35]</sup>

#### Autonomous Search for Foodstuffs

Irrespective of the efforts of the relief committees, the search for additional food remained an unavoidable task for people, especially in urban settlements. People adopted a wide range of strategies in order to cope with it. Open resistance to requisitions and rationing proved to be the less profitable choice. When acting in this way, locals met with crushing violence and death.<sup>[36]</sup> Better outcomes were obtained by the falsification of food cards. Only a few months after the introduction of bread rationing in Vilnius, the total number of faked bread cards in the city exceeded 20,000.<sup>[37]</sup>

While begging for food became widespread in cities, desperation led people to look for it even in dumps<sup>[38]</sup> and waste bins.<sup>[39]</sup> Smuggling from the countryside increased as well. Nonetheless, the task remained extremely tough and dangerous. Bad weather and exhaustion often led to the death of smugglers. Moreover, high prices made even the black market hardly affordable for most city dwellers. In 1917-1918, worsening life conditions pushed people to eat and sell even ravens and cats.<sup>[40]</sup> Creative solutions were often employed to combat the lack of supplies. While the German authorities gave civilians indications on how to use frozen beetroots and potatoes, potato peelings were collected and used for the production of food additives. Several food substitutes appeared, also. Saccharin was used in place of sugar, and chicory and acorns were substitutes for coffee. A mixture of roasted barley and dried fruits was used as a substitute for tea. The increasing lack of cereals led to the use of horse chestnut flour for baking bread.<sup>[41]</sup>

Entrusting children to orphanages and hostels seemed to many the most desirable way to ensure them better nourishment and thus chances of survival. However, the number of applicants considerably outnumbered the available places. Irrespective of efforts, even hostels seemed unable to guarantee the adequate feeding of hosted children. By 1917, in some Vilnius refugee

hostels the daily diet for children was limited to some slices of bread, cabbage, beetroots and 70g of cereals a day.<sup>[42]</sup> Pressed by shortages and scarcity of financial resources, relief operators often had no choice but to transfer as many hostels as possible to the countryside where foodstuffs were easier to obtain. Distributing children among peasants was another tool both relief organizations and poor parents opted for.<sup>[43]</sup> However, relatively better feeding conditions in hostels and orphanages did not prevent children from seeking additional food on their own. That stimulated people to flee relief facilities and even apply to

## Conclusion

different organizations for food.

The territories of the GGW and Ober Ost represented an essential source of foodstuffs for the German home front hit by the blockade. The harsh German requisitions and control regime over foodstuff supplies caused increasing shortages of food and eventually famine and starvation in the local population. While relief committees were the most active in trying to cope with the situation, their actual aid remained limited by circumstances. In 1917/1918, the emergence of nation states in an overall unstable political and socio-economic situation did not represent a turning point for sorting out supply problems.

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