

Food in Wartime: An International Perspective on Food Supply in World War I

Veranstalter: Lehrstuhl für Neuere Geschichte, Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf; Institute of Modern History, University of Hertfordshire (Hatfield, GB)

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Bericht von: Paul Lukas Hähnel, Institut für Geschichtswissenschaften, Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf

The focus of the workshop, attended by both historians and history students, was on specific organizational aspects of food supply during World War I in Germany and Britain and the history of individual foods (coffee and chocolate). Additional topics included the Swedish Potato Revolution in 1917 and food regulation in post-war Germany.

According to the introduction speech of MARGRIT SCHULTE BEERBÜHL (Düsseldorf), the literature on food supply during World War I is remarkably manageable and there are hardly any studies that focus on a transnational perspective although an enormous literature has been published on the war. Nevertheless, the food question was highly important not only in Germany but also among the allies. Food became a fundamental physical question, for malnutrition and hunger threatened not only the fighting strength of the forces in war time, but also the physical and psychological abilities of the civilian population.

JENNY SPRENGER-SEYFFAHRT (Berlin) opened the workshop with a comparison of the war kitchen in Berlin and Vienna and their acceptance during the second half of World War I. Despite the fact that the majority of the population in both cities equated the public kitchen attendance with social descent, the numbers of kitchen visitors in Vienna steadily rose, while merely a few inhabitants of Berlin made use of public meal provision. Besides the obvious explanation that the food supply problems in Vienna were much worse than in Berlin, she stated other reasons for the different development. She argued that the acceptance of public kitchens and people's decision to use them were related to the municipal or-

ganisation of public feeding as well. In this context, she emphasised that the public feeding management in Vienna was more efficient in responding to the needs of the people.

ANNA HAMMERIN (Hertfordshire) shed light on the events in the exceptionally cold spring of 1917 in Sweden, when the country came close to a revolution. Faced with a severe lack of food, a handful of women set out on the first protests that would come to mobilise over a quarter of a million people across the whole country in a period of two weeks. She highlighted a glaring discrepancy between the importance of the so-called potato revolution and the omission of these events in Swedish school history books. Lastly, she stated three different potential explanations: First, Sweden is a consensus-orientated society. Second, the strong role of women is not fitting in familiar narratives. Third, there was a contrasting interest between local and national press coverage.

JULIE MOORE (Hertfordshire) dealt with the milk supply in St. Albans in the United Kingdom based on the minute books of the local military tribunal and local newspapers. In her regional study, she asked questions on how farmers, consumers, and city council managed the expectations of each other and how the local authorities attempted to prevent shortages of milk. Shopkeepers had problems in maintaining their stock because the London merchants were able to pay higher prices for any food that was available. Dairy farmers defended higher milk prices because they were faced with rising costs as well. Furthermore, milk was particularly vulnerable to concerns around quality and safety. Between the milk producers on the one side and the consumers on the other sat the St. Albans City council which found itself frequently called on to take action on issues around food. Additionally, the administration attempted to interpret and implement an enormous number of new directives which arrived on an almost weekly or daily basis from central government.

JONATHAN MORRIS (Hertfordshire) explained how war affected coffee and how coffee, to some extent, affected war. Therefore, he stated that war was an agent that changed coffee tastes and that war could destroy trade-

routes and traders. He gave the example of the American Civil War, which created the basis for the expansion of mass coffee consumption in the United States. America became the first mass market for coffee and it was filled by the growth of the world's largest coffee supplier Brazil. In World War I, Brazil's ability to export coffee was dramatically hit by the war blockade. The speaker concluded that Brazil was dependent on the American market and among other things, the country entered the war to secure exports. Moreover, he highlighted that the behavioural impacts of the war generated a new thirst for coffee in some sections of the troops. During the war, many Italian soldiers tasted real coffee the first time.

Subsequently, CHANTAL BSDURREK (Düsseldorf) delineated the consumption of coffee and its substitutes in Germany during World War I in general and from a local point of view (Düsseldorf), based on the diary of Adele Statz. At the beginning of the war, Germany was able to keep the coffee trade active by shifting the trade-routes to the neutral states of Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands. In August 1915 the imports could no longer satisfy the public demand. As a result, the administration assigned maximum prices, centralized the coffee-distribution, and severe punishments were introduced. Another result of the coffee shortage was that surrogates for coffee became vitally important. At the end of the war, more than 500 surrogates were known. Despite or perhaps because of the scarcity, coffee retained its social significance.

MARGRIT SCHULTE BEERBÜHL (Düsseldorf) examined the function of chocolate as a link between the home front and the fighting front in Germany. She argued that chocolate was instrumentalized in order to create a strong emotional bond between the army and the home front. The bond was woven by the so-called love packages („Liebesgaben“), which were sent by the civilians to the war front. These packages included among other things chocolate. Thereby, chocolate gained a new important quality and a crucial emotional function. However, as a result of the tightening of the naval blockade the price of chocolate had risen to about 800 Marks per

hundredweight and the authorities strengthened the control of the chocolate market. The speaker concluded that the affective bond began to crack with the growing supply problems because voluntary donations by civilians stopped. Finally, in the turnip winter of 1916/17 the emotional bond broke down.

RACHEL DUFFETT (Essex) explored the significance of food to the British army on the Western Front as a narrative of military provisioning and examined the impact of food on the life of working class soldiers. She similarly highlighted the highly emotive function of food as a social bond and as a connection to home. In this context, food parcels which were sent across the Channel played a pivotal role, too. On the one hand she stated that in the letters of the British soldiers, food was a medium through which more general concerns could be articulated. It also provided a vocabulary for the expression of family love founded upon past meals. On the other hand, she analysed the diet of the soldiers and pointed out that rations were a daily reminder of an alien military existence. Although the army provided more calories than many ate as civilians, the central complexity of eating was not addressed in the first years of the war.

JAN NAERT (Ghent) was dealing with food politics in the occupied territories of France and Belgium. Therefore, he analysed the relationship between local population and the Belgian and French mayors against the background of these food politics. He argued that the negative perception of local mayors in previous publications was a result of the complex position of the mayors and the local governments in food politics. Furthermore, he demonstrated that political legitimacy of mayors was not only defined according to the relationship to their occupiers, but also to the relationship with the local population in the context of the food problem. The visible role of the mayors as feeders of the population implies that food politics and local population should be considered important for a better understanding of political legitimacy of the mayors more in general. Finally, he stressed that state authority and legitimacy never collapsed in the occupied territories in contrast to Austria and Germany.

FRANCESCO FRIZERRA (Eichstätt) presented a case study on the federal food supply policies in Germany in the aftermath of World War I. Therefore, he analysed the backflow of measures to control production, distribution and purchase of foodstuffs. He showed the reluctance with which decision makers got rid of these instruments of control and how economic consequences of the war affected the everyday life of civilians for a long time. Germany was not self-sufficient before the war and was dependent on imports. The allied naval blockade resulted in widening the gap between supply and demand and thereby led to the scarcity of food. This led state authorities to introduce market control measures. However, the food shortage afflicting the German population was not over until 1924 and the German agriculture reaches pre-war yield levels in 1929. The speaker concluded that the case study of Germany in the transition between war and peace is an excellent indicator of long-lasting continuities and of the persistence of market control measures.

In their closing remarks, CORINNE PAINTER (Leeds) and SARAH LLOYD (Hertfordshire) pointed out the importance of the topic of food in World War I. They stressed the political dimension of food, the impact of food trading on the international relationships, and its contemporary relevance. In their contribution, they emphasized the function of food as a medium to express identity and a way of demonstrating class affiliation. It could provide social coherence. However, a lack of food could also provide a lack of faith in the government. Finally, they highlighted the possibilities for further research. The workshop showed the necessity for systematic and international comparative studies of food supply, eating habits, and the mechanisms of emerging black markets.

Conference overview:

Margrit Schulte Beerbühl (Düsseldorf): Introduction

Jenny Sprenger-Seyffahrt (Berlin): Public Feeding in the First World War: The War Kitchens of Vienna and Berlin

Anna Hammerlin (Hertfordshire): The Swedish Potato Revolution

Julie Moore (Hertfordshire): The Milk Supply in St. Albans (GB) During the First World War

Jonathan Morris (Hertfordshire): A Caffeinated Conflict? Coffee and the First World War

Chantal Bsdurrek (Düsseldorf): Coffee and its Substitutes During World War I in Germany

Margrit Schulte Beerbühl (Düsseldorf): A Chocolate War: Civilians vs. Army in World War I

Rachel Duffett (Essex): A Taste of Army Life: British Soldiers and Their Food

Jan Naert (Ghent): „Words are wasted on a starving man“ : A Social History of Food Politics by Local Authorities in Occupied Belgium and France (1914–1918)

Francesco Frizzera (Eichstätt): The War for Food After the End of the War. Controlled Economy in Germany in the Aftermath of the War (1918–1924)

Corinne Painter (Leeds), Sarah Lloyd (Hertfordshire): Summary

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