

The Social and Political Consequences of the Allied Food Blockade of Germany, 1918–19

N. P. Howard (*University of Sheffield*)

Introduction

The Allied blockade policy against Germany continued after the signing of the armistice in November 1918. It had already contributed greatly to the reduction of the supplies of food from all sources of the Central Powers by over 50 per cent in the final year of the war. Its impact increased population loss and spread death and disease, as famine encroached upon the civilian populations of Central Europe. Its prolongation by the Allies after the cease-fire was intended as a strategy to prevent the resurgence of German military power and to suppress revolutionary upheavals in Germany and in the states of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The first official histories of the blockade, those of Professor A. C. Bell and Brigadier-General Sir James E. Edmonds,¹ differed widely in their accounts of its effects upon German food supplies, before and after the armistice. Professor Bell, using German data, argued that the food blockade successfully fomented revolution in Germany and caused the collapse of the Kaiser's government. Sir James Edmonds, supported by Colonel I. L. Hunt, the officer in charge of civil affairs in the American occupied zone of the Rhineland, believed that food shortages were a post-armistice phenomenon caused solely by the disruptions of the November revolution. More recent studies² also disagree on the severity of the blockade in its impact on the affected populations at the time of the revolution and the armistice.

In the first part of this study, contemporary accounts, records from the British Ministry of Blockade, British and German cabinet minutes, and demographic evidence from German sources, are used to assess the extent to

¹ A. C. Bell, *The Blockade of the Central Empires* (HMSO, London, 1961), completed in 1937 for restricted use; Brigadier-General Sir James E. Edmonds, *The Occupation of the Rhineland* (HMSO, London, 1987), originally published for official use only in 1944; Colonel I. L. Hunt, *The American Military Government of Occupied Germany* (US Government Printing Office, Washington, 1943), submitted originally in March 1920.

² C. Paul Vincent, *The Politics of Hunger, The Allied Blockade of Germany* (Ohio, 1985); Avner Offer, *The First World War, An Agrarian Interpretation* (Oxford, 1989); J. P. Bott, *The German Food Crisis of World War I: The Cases of Coblenz and Cologne* (PhD thesis, University of Missouri-Columbia, 1981).

which famine conditions prevailed throughout Germany at the time of the Allied decision to extend the blockade. Emphasis is given more to the actuality of the hunger blockade and less to the propaganda issues that arose. Whether the food shortages prior to the armistice were more a consequence of four years of total war than a direct result of the blockade is not under examination. However, in the period of demobilization from November 1918 to the official lifting of the blockade on 12 July 1919, its prolonged imposition was a major factor in the continuation of the widespread and severe malnutrition, and the consequent civilian deaths from hunger and deficiency diseases, that were a feature of the final year of the war.

The impact of the continued food blockade upon Republican Germany's embryonic institutions, in particular on the soldiers' and workers' Councils, is examined in the central section of this study. The continued blockade was the main feature of Anglo-German relations during the revolution, the armistice, and the peace talks. Its changed application from an instrument of open war to one of diplomacy and, at the same time, its use for the control and suppression of civil conflict, seen by the Allies as a portent of Bolshevism, are discussed in the final section of the article.

1. The Blockaded Population and the Inequality of Hunger

The post-armistice food blockade against Germany was applied with particular severity until the end of March 1919 and was then partially raised until 12 July 1919 when it was ended by the Treaty of Versailles. In the months of October and November 1918, famine conditions were prevalent in many cities and industrial regions. From 1914 the blockade had contributed gradually to a reduction of 50 per cent in the supply of food to the population. By the end of October 1918, the reduction in the consumption of protein foods amounted to over 80 per cent.³ From the end of the shooting war, which had claimed three million military lives in Central Europe,⁴ to the conclusion of the state of hostilities, the continued food blockade brought about a quarter of a million additional deaths among the civilian population of Germany, within its post-1919 boundaries.

In response to the blockade before the cease-fire, German counter-measures had ranged from all-out submarine warfare to food rationing, and from local crop requisitions to the plundering of occupied territories. These only added to the hardships of civilians. Requisitions led to hoarding by wealthy farmers, and in particular cases, outright plundering decreased food production and regional exports almost to zero. As an example, in Austrian-occupied Serbia in 1916, military exactions caused the subsequent deaths from hunger and

³ Jans Flemming, *Landwirtschaftliche Interessen und Demokratie* (Bonn, 1978), p. 87. Part 1, chs. 1, 2 on the extent of the food shortages in Germany.

⁴ Quincy Wright, *A Study of War* (Chicago, 1965), p. 664. *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich, 1921-22* (Berlin, 1922), p. 42, for civilian deaths.

typhus of 365,000 people, according to Serbian calculations, in a mainly food-producing region.⁵

For the alleviation of shortages by rationing, Germany's 1915 civilian population of 60 million was divided into two main groups, the self-suppliers or rural food producers, numbering almost 14 million, and the remaining 46 million, nominated as state-entitled consumers, 31 million of whom were urban dwellers. A third category of army-authorized personnel, comprising more than 7 million, was drafted into service as the war progressed.⁶ The large numbers of prisoners of war were not included in these categories.⁷ The vulnerability of the urban populations of Central Europe to what Germany's military High Command acknowledged as England's starvation plans, arose from their food-import dependency and was made clear in a report compiled from German sources, received by the Ministry of Blockade in London from Petrograd in July 1917.⁸ The report concluded that 'all Germany's attempts to produce fodder substitutes to replace over 4 million tons of imports of cattle feed concentrates, have been unsuccessful'. The result was a continuous reduction in the output of meat and fats. The grain harvest was down to 12 million tons from a pre-war produce of 21 million tons. Of this catastrophically reduced amount, 30 per cent was allocated to the 7 million in the armed services. The share for the 14 million agricultural self-suppliers was 12 per cent of the total. The urban civilians, numbering 67 per cent of the total population, were allocated 33 per cent of the grain harvest. The remainder was distributed in amounts of 6 per cent to heavy-task workers, for seed, for potato substitutes, and for industrial alcohol production, plus 9 per cent to army reserves.

In the second half of 1918, individual rations, when available, in comparison with pre-war levels of consumption per head,⁹ were down to 12 per cent of the peacetime diet of meat, 5 per cent in fish, 7 per cent in fats, 13 per cent in eggs, 28 per cent in butter, 15 per cent in cheese, 6 per cent in beans and pulses, 82 per cent in sugar, 94 per cent in potatoes, 16 per cent in margarine, and 48 per cent in the bread diet. The failures of the rationing system deepened social inequalities in Germany by the end of the shooting war. It operated in favour of the rural, self-supplying population and the army and to the ultimate disadvantage of town and city consumers, though supplementary rations for *Schwerarbeiter* in the heavy industries reduced food inequalities among a minority of well-unionized workers. The inequalities of the food-rationing

⁵ Bell, *Blockade*, p. 576.

⁶ Professor Peter Struve, *The Exhaustion of Germany's Food and Fodder Supply* (Petrograd, 1917). Mimeographed copy in the Public Record Office, FO 382:1312, f. no. 93695, p. 11.

⁷ 1.33 million prisoners of war and internees worked mainly on the land: Offer, *Agrarian Interpretation*, p. 62. Others were fed meagrely by contractors or were dependent upon relief parcels: J. Powell and F. Gribble, *The History of Ruhleben* (London, 1919), p. 75.

⁸ Struve, pp 9, 16. Later confirmed in M. Parmelee, *Blockade and Sea Power* (New York, 1924), p. 206.

⁹ Flemming, *Landwirtschaftliche Interessen* p. 87.

system¹⁰ were thus built into the system of food allocations by the wartime coalition between the High Command and the civil authorities. These were compounded by the *Schleichhandel* or black market, but the overall failure was to the miscalculation by the coalition of the impact of the blockade on total food production and imported supplies.

By the time of the armistice, shortages were so general that inequalities of food distribution were exacerbated more by black-market pricing than by rationing and price controls. 'According to contemporary estimates, from one-eighth to one-seventh of flour, meal and vegetable distribution, a quarter to a third of milk, butter and cheese and from one-third to a half of meat, eggs and fruit were distributed through the black markets at insane prices that reached up to ten-times pre-war price levels.'¹¹ The effects of the blockade on the poor were accentuated by inequalities in incomes that contributed to the grossly unequal food consumption outlined in Table I.

TABLE I
Average Daily Meat Consumption in grams per head, by groups

Year	Army Personnel	Self-Suppliers	Consumers
1914	285	60	145
1915	132	60	135
1916	160	75	65
1917	145	80	48
1918	127	90	28

Source: J. Fleming, *Landwirtschaftliche Interessen und Demokratie* (Bonn, 1978), p. 87. Taken from R. Berthold, *Einige Bemerkungen über den Entwicklungsstand des bäuerlichen Ackerbaus von den Agrarreformen des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Schriften des Instituts für Geschichte, 1/10 (Berlin-DDR 1962), p. 109.

Contemporary evidence and statistical reports confirmed that famine conditions were experienced by the poor in many German cities in October 1918. Evidence came mainly through the neutral European press to the British Blockade Ministry and from military intelligence sources. MI6 reported that from June to September 1917, death rates from nearly 10,000 cases of hunger typhus in Germany averaged 22.3 per cent and varied from 7 per cent in Frankfurt-am-Main to 74.5 per cent in Dortmund. A Swedish newspaper in

¹⁰ Gerald D. Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labour in Germany, 1914-1918*, p. 443. See also Bott, *German Food Crisis*, ch. 1.

¹¹ Flemming, *Landwirtschaftliche Interessen*, p. 88

January 1918 published reports from the German life insurance companies that the death rate of the civil population was beginning to compete with the death rate on the battlefields.¹² Dutch workmen employed at Krupps, Essen, in 1918 reported widespread underfeeding, with the diet made up almost entirely of potatoes and deteriorating by the week. Dysentery was widespread.¹³ The same report detailed the grain fiasco that was described openly in the press. A cut in the flour ration was made in mid-May, as Ukrainian peasants forcibly resisted German army requisitions by destroying their half-ripened crops. Rumanian supplies dwindled as crops failed due to severe weather in June. In early October 1918 a Danish news report from Germany spoke of workers collapsing at their machines, of railway passengers fainting for lack of food, of fights during food parcel distribution. The reporter anticipated that 'if the Western front gives way and disturbances take place, the German people will undoubtedly suffer real starvation . . . even the slightest disturbance of the social mechanism will cause the artificial food mechanism to fall to pieces'. Only the Entente statesmen could prevent a catastrophe.¹⁴

In the first week of the revolution, when the soldiers' Council took over the Ruhleben prisoner-of-war camp on the outskirts of Berlin, it was surrounded by begging and starving children. Even in middle-class households the larders were empty.¹⁵

Most of these reports were corroborated by the official investigations into hunger and unrest that were ordered by the British government and carried out by British army officers from mid-December 1918 to April 1919.¹⁶ American reporters confirmed that the Germans really were in great need for food, adding in late November 1918 that 'the revolution passed off so systematically and pedantically that the American people will be ready to afford these revolutionaries their full support'.¹⁷ The British army officers' reports understated the situation, leading one historian¹⁸ to interpret them as confirming no obvious signs of malnutrition, but a later report by one of them, writing after demobilization as a journalist, spoke of appalling hospital conditions in Frankfurt-an-der-Oder in early 1919, of high infant mortality and adult fatalities from tuberculosis and kidney and stomach disorders. Ten per cent of hospital patients had died from lack of food. No efforts were made to save old people, while youth was dying so fast. 'We saw some terrible sights in the

¹² PRO FO 382:1836, f. no. 11663, 9 Jan. 1918.

¹³ PRO Secret Service Report. F 199/9/2, 1918.

¹⁴ PRO FO 382:1836, f. no. 172155, 6 Nov. 1918.

¹⁵ Powell and Gribble, *History of Ruhleben*, p. 243.

¹⁶ Reports by British officers on the *Economic Conditions Prevailing in Germany*, Dec. 1918 to Mar. 1919. (HMSO, London, 1919). Cmd. 52. Mar. and Apr. 1919. Ernest H. Starling and C. W. Guillebaud, report on *Food Conditions in Germany*, with memoranda on *Agricultural Conditions in Germany* (HMSO, London, 1919). Cmd. 280.

¹⁷ PRO, CAB 23/4. WC 500a, p. 421, 30 Nov 1918.

¹⁸ Offer, *Agrarian Interpretation*, p. 389.

childrens' hospital, such as the "starvation babies" with ugly, swollen heads.¹⁹

From eyewitness reports to overall statistics, the evidence for imminent famine in Germany in late 1918 is very strong. Whereas the monthly average civilian deaths in Germany in 1913 had amounted to 78,820, throughout 1918 the numbers dying each month rose to 191,320 in October and 184,896 in November.²⁰ More than 3500 people were dying each day of hunger and malnutrition in those months. In the eight months from the signing of the armistice to the lifting of the blockade at the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, the records indicate that in Germany, an additional 245,299 deaths occurred among civilians, above the normal death rate for 1913. (See Table II). Forty per cent of these occurred in November 1918, an amount that justified both the claims at the time that famine was imminent and the responses of those who struggled to prevent its increase.

TABLE II
Military and Civilian Deaths, and Excess Civilian Deaths over 1913; Germany:
1914-19

Adjusted civilian deaths*—1913: 945,835

<i>Year</i>	<i>Military Deaths</i>	<i>Civilian Deaths</i>	<i>Civilian Excess</i>
	(i)	(ii)	(iii)
1914	241,343	988,204	42,369
1915	434,034	954,706	8,871
1916	340,468	957,586	11,751
1917	281,905	1,014,433	68,598
1918	379,777	1,216,882	271,047
1919	14,314	1,017,284	71,449
TOTALS	1,691,841	6,149,095	474,085

Source: Dr Rudolf Meerwarth, *Die Einwirkung des Krieges auf Bevölkerungsbewegung, Einkommen und Lebenshaltung in Deutschland* (Stuttgart, 1932), pp.20, 51, 55.

* Meerwarth's figures in Table 16 are adjusted *pro rata* to exclude Alsace-Lorraine and the Polish provinces, for the six years recorded and based on the total for 1913. All figures exclude migrants, internees, and war prisoners. The reduced figures in columns (ii) and (iii) for 1915 and 1916 are influenced by the removal of approximately 11 million males from the cohort and by continued US and neutral food supplies that were not fully blockaded until 1917. The figures for 1918 and 1919 are taken from monthly returns in the *Statistisches Jahrbuch*, (Berlin, 1922), p.42, . . . 8.

¹⁹ G. E. R. Gedye, *The Revolver Republic* (London, 1930), p. 30.

²⁰ *Statistisches Jahrbuch*, p. 42.

In the same months, a propaganda debate on these deaths took place in the Allied countries and in Germany, but in more recent times the conventional historical explanation for this upsurge in mortality attributed most loss of life not to hunger but to influenza.²¹ However, an American investigation in late January 1919 concluded that 'starvation per se is rarely the cause of death, rather the weakened body succumbs to infection of some sort'.²² Influenza morbidity rates depended upon doctors' records of what was then a non-notifiable disease. Colonel Hunt reported no serious influenza in any part of American-occupied territory, among a population of nearly a million. British army deaths from October 1918 to March 1919 were 5,483.²³ Offer quotes 209,000 German influenza deaths, as estimated by the Berlin Medical Society in its report in mid-December 1918 on the damage to the German population from the 'illegal enemy trade blockade'. The American Medical Association in 1927 lowered this estimate to 150,000 and a German study in 1928 by Dr Frank Bumm, President of the German Health Department in 1918, discovered 'that 3.9 per cent of increased German mortality in 1918 was attributable to influenza', or 10,029 out of the additional 271,047 civilian deaths when compared with 1913.²⁴

Colonel Hunt, civil administrator of the US occupation of the Rhineland, commented on the urban poor in the large cities, that 'no cognizance of this class was taken by the Germans in their various allegations made to show the results of food shortage caused by the "inhuman" blockade of the Allies'. No records were kept of the social-class distribution of mortality and sickness, but from reports comparing rural with industrial regions there is much evidence of greater losses among heavy manual and industrial workers than in other occupation groups and social classes. The British government investigations in late 1918 and early 1919 discovered considerable malnutrition in mining districts.

Civilian death rates per thousand in Germany varied from city to town and country. They increased throughout Germany by 65 per cent from 1913 to 1918 but by only 43 per cent in rural Bavaria. In the largest cities they rose

²¹ Press coverage on the issue is in S. L. Bane and R. H. Lutz, *The Blockade after the Armistice, 1918-1919* (Stanford, Ca., 1942), pp. 629-805. The propaganda argument about deaths from the food blockade is dealt with in Bernhard Menne, *Armistice and Germany's Food Supply, 1918-19* (London, 1944), p. 91. Menne criticized the Reich Health Office figure of 763,000 deaths from hunger published in December 1918 as part of a 'hateful legend' put forward to counteract Allied reparations claims. Menne accepted a figure of 424,000 from Dr F. Bumm, ex-President of the RHO, published in 1928, which includes deaths from a 'shortage of heating material'. This figure is confirmed in this study, which also includes additional deaths occurring in 1919.

²² Quoted in Bott, *German Food Crisis*, p. 21. There is no evidence in the population statistics for the estimated 40 million influenza deaths in Europe, quoted by Ruth Henig, *Versailles and After, 1919-1923* (London, 1984), p. 2.

²³ *Official History of the War, Medical Diseases*, vol. 1 (HMSO, London, 1922), p. 175.

²⁴ Quoted in Vincent, *Politics of Hunger*, p. 141.

by 71 per cent, for example in Berlin, and by 76 per cent in Hamburg; in smaller towns like Oldenburg by 81 per cent, and by 93 per cent in the Ruhr district of Lippe.

There is much evidence that women were more affected by food shortages than men. The British army officers visiting Berlin in early February 1919 discovered from five leading Berlin doctors that 'women in childbirth are dying on a terrible scale'.²⁵ The greatest price for food shortages was paid not only by mothers. In October and November 1918, deaths among females in all age groups were 25 per cent higher than the combined monthly deaths recorded in peacetime for both males and females. These extraordinarily high death rates were experienced more among the younger age groups. For every hundred young women who died in the age groups 15 to 25 in 1913, 290 women died in 1918. The corresponding figure for young males before the age of call-up was 215. For the additional 5 million women brought into war-work, the burden of domestic labour without adequate food was compounded by even harder physical and psychological exertion, often with fatal consequences for their health.²⁶

The historical and propaganda dispute that took place in the immediate aftermath of the armistice and arose again in 1944 over the real effects of the blockade, challenged the argument that famine conditions were its consequence by referring to the low wartime levels of post-neo-natal infant mortality as evidence of its lack of impact on the population. The proof, which was reiterated by Offer,²⁷ requires further analysis. Infant mortality was high in the years before the war. Out of every hundred children born in Germany in 1913, fifteen died in the first year of life, on average. Throughout the war years the national average varied from 16.4 in the first year of the war, dropping to 14.0 in 1916 and rising to 15.8 in 1918. The rates were over 20 per cent in the mining area of Silesia but were as low as 12 per cent in Hamburg.²⁸ These relatively small changes in infant mortality compared with other age groups resulted from the reduced size of the infant cohort due to the halving of the birth rate during the war. This had the effect of making more food available for the rationing schemes which gave higher allowances to pregnant women and infants. The total numbers of German children born annually fell from 1.84 million in 1913 to 0.93 million in 1918. As milk was removed from the diet of most adults, the reduced numbers of children were able to receive increased milk rations during most of the war. This was not the case, however, at the time of the armistice. A letter from the doctors who ran the milk allocation scheme in Hamburg, in November 1918, revealed that

²⁵ Cmd. 52, p. 62.

²⁶ Quoted in Werner Thönnessen, *The Emancipation of Women; Germany 1863-1933* (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1969; transl., London, 1973), p. 78.

²⁷ Menne, *Armistice*, p. 94. Offer, *Agrarian Interpretation*, pp. 36-7. Both authors use statistical methods that confirm their assessments.

²⁸ Meerwarth, *Bevölkerungsbewegung*, p. 65.

the supply of milk was one-quarter of the pre-war amount and the demands of pregnant mothers, infants, children, and the seriously ill could not be met. As supplies of milk were one-third below needs, when the influenza outbreak required an additional 20 per cent, doctors had to deprive all but the most urgent cases of their special rations.

MI6 reported to the British War Trade Intelligence Department that the miners in Strasbourg complained of undernourishment. 'Their children are dying like flies and coal production is 30 per cent down.'²⁹ Low increases in infant mortality in the first year of life were more than offset by the increased mortality rate among 1- to 5-year-old children throughout the war. In Germany, this rose from 13.5 to 21.8 per thousand male children and from 12.8 to 22.3 among females. 365,581 children aged from 1 to 5 died in the years 1915 to 1918, representing a child mortality rate among this group of 86 per thousand.

The social and political reality behind these statistics is recorded in the minutes of the German War Cabinet in the month before the signing of the armistice. The conditions at home facing the defeated armies in Germany were described by the Majority Social Democrat Scheidemann, brought into the War Cabinet as part of the 'revolution from above' to pre-empt a revolution from below, who reported on 17 October 1918: 'We have no longer any meat. We cannot deliver potatoes because we are short of 4,000 rail cars every day. We have absolutely no fats left.' The misery was so great that Scheidemann put the question to the generals, 'What does North Berlin live on and how does East Berlin exist?'³⁰ The rapidly approaching famine impressed even on the leadership of the non-revolutionary middle classes, many of whose members were suffering from serious malnutrition, the need for peace and drastic changes in government. Von Payer, leader of the Progressive Party, protested angrily on 25 October against the High Commands' efforts to continue the war for another winter. The generals pleaded that demands by its enemies to remove the Kaiser would cost Germany its national and military honour. Von Payer, as 'a burgher and a civilian pure and simple', could see nothing of honour, but 'only the starving people'. General Ludendorff replied that things were leading to Bolshevism in the army and at home 'within a few weeks'.³¹

2. Famine, Peace, and Revolt

When the terms of the armistice were discussed by Allied and German representatives from 8 to 11 November 1918, the political argument over the extent of the famine was conducted in a climate of suspicion, ignorance, secrecy and propaganda on all sides. The British negotiator, Admiral Wemyss,

²⁹ PRO, FO. 382. 1312, f. no. 93695, 12 July 1917.

³⁰ *Preliminary History of the Armistice* (New York, 1924), p. 87.

³¹ M. Kitchen, *The Silent Dictatorship* (London, 1976), p. 264.

reported to Prime Minister Lloyd George 'that the term that causes the greatest consternation among the German delegates is the blockade, as they fear famine and sickness. They also talk of the danger of Bolshevism, but I'm not sure this is not part of their game. Conditions in Germany are far worse than we thought'.³² The Germans sought to moderate the harshness of these terms. They complained that the orders to leave 'all provisions that were intended for the troops' and their means of rail transportation, would drive the population of unoccupied Germany into famine. The Allied demand to surrender tens of thousands of machine guns would 'leave them with insufficient to fire on their own men'.³³ The Allies made no concession on rail transport, but in return for the surrender of Germany's marine transport, offered to amend article XXVI, the clause continuing the blockade, by agreeing to 'contemplate the provisioning of Germany, to such extent as shall be found necessary'. The request for the remission of 5000 machine guns and lorries for the maintenance of order was conceded to the Germans. The new German Cabinet put together by the MSPD and the USPD, the right and independent left wings of the Social Democratic Party, on 10 November was informed by the Allied powers on 18 November 1918 that the Entente would meet 'the present *bourgeois-socialist* republic halfway in the matter of peace terms and food supplies' as long as its government kept 'its present composition under Ebert's leadership'. The Allies would intervene with all their might, however, 'to forestall the rise of Bolshevism'.³⁴ The Germans agreed in the following weeks to hand over their merchant ships, provided that they stayed under German crews and carried food for the relief of Germany, but action by the sailors' unions in Hamburg to enforce these provisos delayed the agreement.

The Allies disagreed among themselves as to how the provisioning of Germany should be paid for, whether in gold or paper marks, and whether the German merchant fleet should be surrendered as part of reparation payments. These disagreements dragged on until mid-March 1919, but the delays served to prolong the intended enforcement of a total restriction on food supplies until the Allies were sure that relief to Germany would not fall either into the hands of a revived German army under its traditional leaders, or alternatively into those of a pro-Bolshevik socialist state. Successive revolutions in Bavaria and Hungary led to the prolongation of the blockade for a further four months after the handing over of gold and merchant ships in March 1919.

By late 1918, although moving steadily towards it, Germany was not yet in a state of total famine. One and a half million tons of food remained in the

³² PRO, CAB 23/14. WC 500a, p. 311, App. 2, 11 Nov 1918.

³³ David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs* (London, 1936), ii. 1983.

³⁴ Charles B. Burdick and Ralph H. Lutz, *The Political Institutions of the German Revolution, 1918-1919* (Stanford, Ca., 1966), p. 70.

control of the army³⁵ and other stocks were hoarded by large manufacturing companies, the wealthier farmers and landlords. However, the unequal distribution of these reduced supplies placed numerous poorer sections of the community in considerable jeopardy. The problem of accelerating and equalizing the distribution of these stocks lay in the bureaucratic and centralized system that decreed from Berlin instructions that were ignored by powerful economic groups in opposition to the War (and later Reich) Food Office.

In these circumstances, the immediate post-armistice problems of the army's food stocks, probably the largest in the country, were twofold. Firstly, large quantities remained in France and Belgium, or in Poland and the Ukraine. Secondly, article VI of the armistice terms required of the Germans that the western stocks of their military food should not be removed during the fixed periods for evacuation and all 'stores of food of all kinds for the civil population, cattle, etc. *shall be left in situ*'. The German Minister of War relayed this requirement to the provisional Cabinet on 10 November, as an obligation to feed the Allied occupation troops.

Faced with Allied demands and the bureaucratic inertia of the German War Food Office, the lower ranks of the German Army took the initiative to relieve the famine by retrieving food stocks destined for allied control and removing them to Germany. These ranks reduced and finally removed the control of their own Officer Corps in the weeks and days immediately prior to the Armistice.

The Allied commanders, aware of the political dangers that had arisen from contacts between the German army and the Bolsheviks during the occupation of the Ukraine in early 1918, were anxious not to repeat the same risks. They therefore insisted on a five-day lapse before moving their armies forward to occupy the left bank of the Rhine. In this interval, the old German command structure completely collapsed, leaving neither the Allied nor the German officer corps in control of the remaining food stocks in the forward bases during the first phase of the withdrawal of Hindenburg's armies from Belgium and France to the east of the Rhine.

The gap in the command structure was filled by more than ten thousand soldiers' Councils.³⁶ Necessity forced them to play a leading part in resolving the food crisis during the retreat and withdrawal of the German armies. By demoting their officers and by rapidly demobilizing themselves the soldiers' Councils saved hundreds of thousands of families from hunger while protecting themselves from recriminations as deserters.

The movement against the army's food stocks started before the armistice talks, in the wave of desertions that began in early August 1918. All reports of the German High Command to the War Cabinet linked the desertions to the plundering of food and other stores. The number of deserters can be

³⁵ *Preliminary History*, p. 81.

³⁶ Walter Goerlitz, *The German General Staff* (New York, 1953), p. 206.

assessed by comparing total German army strength in manpower in March 1918, which on all fronts stood at 7.9 million,³⁷ with the strength at the time of the armistice, when their numbers had fallen to 5.64 million.³⁸ Out of this loss of 2.26 million servicemen, an estimated 1.5 million were killed, injured, or missing, or captured on the battlefields in the same period.³⁹ Thus approximately 0.75 million German soldiers deserted before the armistice. Reports to the Cabinet indicated, by way of confirmation, that the numbers needed in addition to those from conscription to make good the army's losses varied from 637,000 to 950,000 above the required casualty replacements.

Germany's western armies began to collapse after the halting of General Ludendorff's spring offensive, for want of food and supplies. He explained that his subsequent defeat on 8 August was due to influenza, the potato famine at home, and a shortage of 70,000 recruits per month that had caused six or seven army divisions to break up, at least one of which 'absolutely refused to fight'. With the breakdown in morale came the change in political attitudes. One officer had told Ludendorff that 'he thought he had Russian Bolsheviki under him, not German soldiers'. Allied internees at Ruhleben POW camp heard from their captors of the defiance of discipline in the German ranks before the armistice. Officers could inspire action from their men only by telling them 'there was no food in Germany, but plenty of it in the French and British depots'.

After the news of Germany's call for an armistice on 3 October, the rate of desertion and plundering accelerated. On 18 October, Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, Commander of the 6th German Army, and Admiral von Hintze both reported to the interim Chancellor, Prince Max von Baden, that dwindling numbers of exhausted troops surrendered in hordes while thousands plundered the districts around the bases. Hungry, demoralized, and retiring troops turned on the fresh divisions going into action, shouting 'Blackleg! You're prolonging the war.' Those missing from home leave rose all summer to hundreds of thousands. Thus Wheeler-Bennett's description of 'a general strike of a hopelessly defeated army against the madness of its leaders'⁴⁰ appears substantially correct, though the fate of this 'strike' remains unexplained.

The rate of desertion accelerated after the armistice talks into a mass demobilization organized by the soldiers' Councils. Plundering for food retrieval and other activities of the deserting soldiers reduced the generals to a state of impotence. They attempted in vain to stop the organized dissolution of the armies. Scheidemann reported to the Inner War Cabinet on 7 November

³⁷ House of Lords Record Office, David Lloyd George Papers, F 46/10/9, taken from *Reichsarchiv*, 1921.

³⁸ A. Tardieu, *The Truth about the Treaty* (Indianapolis, 1921), p. 142. Tardieu was aide to Clemenceau at Versailles.

³⁹ Major General Sir F. Maurice, *The Last Four Months* (London, 1919), p. 127.

⁴⁰ J. W. Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power, The German Army in Politics* (London, 1953), p. 15.

that 'the High Command's ban on the formation of workers' and soldiers' Councils gave rise to general hilarity. It is as effective as forbidding that it rain tomorrow.'

An Economic Demobilization Office was hastily created by Government decree on 7 November, with national and local offices. Its Director, Colonel Koeth of the War Supplies Office, came under immediate press criticism 'that troops were not being released in an orderly manner', despite Government plans for a gradual release phased to meet 'economic and social considerations'. He replied that going home, the major idea in the minds of the troops, should not be 'clumsily' resisted.⁴¹ General Maercker, later a commander of the *Freikorps*, had no doubts that desertion should be resisted. He described the formation of the Councils as the antithesis of organization. After the armistice negotiations had become known, 'the spark of revolution sprang quickly across the contaminated bases', reserve troops ran home to their dependants, depots were plundered for food, items of uniform, horses, and vehicles were sold to enemy civilians at give-away prices, hospital trains were overpowered to take the deserters back to their homelands, leaving troops at the front without supplies. Plundering deserters linked up with Belgian guerrillas, blocked the Maas bridges, and had to be fired on as though they were enemies.⁴²

Maercker's description of a disloyal rabble in chaotic retreat is not confirmed by Sir William Townley's report from the Hague. He described how 70,000 German deserters crossed the border on 12 November into neutral Holland and to avoid risks to Dutch civilians from armed clashes with 'loyal' German units, gave up their arms to the Dutch authorities. The movement was with Belgian approval, but as civilians were exposed, there was a 'need to let these deserters through'. Driving herds of cattle they transferred large quantities of food onto Dutch trains and proceeded into Germany, an operation which lasted from 12 to 23 November.⁴³

These two contradictory accounts of the withdrawal throw into serious question the subsequent claims of the German generals that the withdrawal of the German Armies, wrongly described by Wheeler-Bennett as without incident, represented a victory for the Officer Corps. Townley's communication confirmed that the breach of article VI of the armistice, imposed by the Allies to deprive Germany of its front-line food stocks, was achieved by the soldiers' Councils. Their removal of cattle led to an internal wrangle among officials in the blockade division of the British Foreign Office over whether the food was of Belgian origin. They complained of Dutch immorality in allowing the use of their railways to loot Belgian cattle.⁴⁴ Dutch statements

⁴¹ Gerald D. Feldman, 'The Economic and Social Problems of the German Demobilization, 1918-19', *Journal of Modern History*, 1 (1975), 1-47.

⁴² Maercker, *Vom Kaiserheer zur Reichswehr*, (Leipzig, 1921), pp. 19-20.

⁴³ PRO, FO. 371, f. no. 3451, pp. 46, 78, 122, 16 Nov 1918.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 56, Dec. 1918.

defended the move, adding that the animals were German, Bavarian draught oxen, and that the food stocks were not booty but provisions.⁴⁵ Edmonds reported that the Councils controlled everything including railways, telegraphs, telephones, and wireless. Some officers were permitted to function, without control and in fear of the men, 'after some of their number had been killed in fights between parties of Germans'. The whole movement was over the frontier into Germany within fifteen days. During the retreat of the collapsing armies, the Councils took control not only of large quantities of surplus stocks of food that remained at the front in the base areas, but also of those in the barns of many big landlords.

The facts of the retrieval of food supplies, of their removal from the control of the German High Command, and of the prevention of their surrender to the Allies are documented in many sources, including eight of the ten reports prepared by the British investigating officers who visited Germany in the four months after the armistice. Some of these reports were undoubtedly presented by their German sources in the worst possible light. Offer's research questions the official reports that the army's food stocks were 'looted, destroyed or abandoned in the first weeks after the armistice, or handed over to civilians'. He suggests that the War Office kept 'a sufficient reserve of food to resist the military and ideological menace in the East and in the large cities at home'. This was undoubtedly the strategy of the Government, but Offer gives no figures as to the size of military stocks in October 1918, reporting only the depleted amount available for these purposes in February 1919. His observation does, however, explain the bitter and immediate confrontations between the new Government and the Councils. The enormous amounts of food removed by the soldiers' Councils of the 4th, 6th, 17th, and 18th Armies served to overcome the immediate effects of the hunger-blockade in the first phase of its continuation.

Most of the soldier's Councils accepted the ideas and leadership of the Majority Social Democrat Party,⁴⁶ though they acted with increasing independence of its political control in the immediate food supply crisis of the revolution. Their actions threw the soldier's Councils into an instant confrontation with the newly appointed Government of Fritz Ebert. In the process, the soldiers formed alliances with the workers' Councils that had originated in the main manufacturing areas during the wartime strikes over food shortages and working conditions in June–July 1917 and January 1918.

Despite their overwhelming support for the new government, the independent actions of the soldiers' Councils were also rejected by the joint MSPD–USPD leadership which, immediately after 9 November, insisted that the task of food distribution should be placed in the hands of Herr Wurm, newly appointed by the USPD as State Secretary in the Reich Food Office in

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁴⁶ Jürgen Tampke, *The Ruhr and Revolution* (London, 1979), p. xv.

Berlin. The Office insisted that because of jurisdictional disputes over the food supply, Herr Wurm required a dictatorial mandate, otherwise 'the food distribution system will break down'.⁴⁷

General Gröner, Ludendorff's replacement, reported to Cabinet on the Allies' fear of Bolshevism, noting that it deprived them of 'the least intention of crossing the Rhine'. They were thus not able to recover the food stores removed wholesale by the Councils. The evidence shows that the Ebert government also had little control over their recovery. A wireless communication via Warsaw on 16 November 1918 from the Soldiers' Council at Kovno on the German east front, confirmed the role of the Councils in the relocation of abandoned foodstocks. It emphasized the enormous responsibility that lay upon the soldiers' Councils of East Front Comrades as a result of the terms of the Armistice. Warning deserting soldiers in the east to refrain from leaving their posts, the communication stressed that millions of men, women, and children would starve 'if the conveyance of supplies is made impossible. We are faced with an unutterable disaster as the problem of food supplies threatens the future of the people. It is absolutely vital to save for the people at home, the enormous quantities of army food stockpiled in the west. Only an orderly retreat could save the situation, if the food supplies were successfully sent on ahead. We should not consider ourselves but rather our homeland and our comrades in the west'.⁴⁸

A million troops stayed on in the east, according to General Gröner, but by mid-December these troops could no longer be held at their posts and were deserting at the rate of ten thousand per day. By 21 January 1919, Gröner announced that the army in the west had 'vanished' and forces in the east were down to 130,000 men.

Confirmation of the amounts of food retrieved for the civilian population by the soldiers was provided on 5 December 1918 by *Soziale Praxis*, a journal circulating among the German employers' associations,⁴⁹ according to which the German High Command controlled 30 per cent of national grain stocks and 60 per cent of meat supplies. Struve reported in 1916-17 that the grain allocation for the army and the fleet stood at 2.3 million tons, plus an additional 1.2 million tons for reserves. These quantities were more than halved by the end of 1918. In the War Cabinet discussions from 17 October to 5 November on whether to fight a last-ditch battle or press for an armistice, the Army revealed that it had 1.5 million tons of grain, plus 140,000 horses and foodstuffs. Army food supplies in the Ukraine for one million people amounted to 400,000 tons, though these and other foodstuffs in the east were not collected for want of 500 trains required to move them. This was confirmed by a report to the British Foreign Office from Bavaria on 3 December 1918.

⁴⁷ German Cabinet minutes, Burdick and Lutz, *Political Institutions*, p. 67, 15 Nov. 1918.

⁴⁸ FO 371, f. no. 3451, p. 152, 16 Nov. 1918.

⁴⁹ Bane and Lutz, *Blockade*, p. 653.

The Bavarian revolutionaries were cleared of any suspicion of plundering in the report of the Allied Economic Mission to Munich at the end of January 1919.

The Reich Food Office reported to Allied officers that the remaining army food stores still under control of the High Command in mid-February 1919 were reduced to 340,000 tons of grain products, with another 50,000 tons of food stored in Hamburg. These stocks were raided in early February after the Ministry of War had reserved them for military use only, but an intervention by the soldiers' Council made them available for the civilian population. Offer describes these stocks as the main prop of the 'socialist-military' Government of Ebert, Gröner, and Noske, but their reduction to one-quarter of the original amount under the control of the High Command showed how vulnerable the new regime was, faced with the actual and potential powers of the Councils.

Over the previous three months, five million troops had dispersed under their own Councils and in the process had redistributed an estimated one million tons of food. This amount includes the stocks that were removed from the barns of the wealthier farmers. In many cases, these were unlocked by soldiers' Councils in the rural hinterlands. As an example, Wilhelm Necker, the delegate of the Soldiers' Council in the garrison town of Stargard, East Pomerania, reported that his council had decided that it 'should have the power of defending the revolution and controlling food supply and distribution'. It was known that the great estates of East Pomerania had many more cattle and pigs than were in the compulsory register. These supplies were impounded and distributed among the troops, the townspeople, and prisoners of war, and the immigrant Polish workers.⁵⁰ British army officers in Hamburg in January 1919 were officially informed that soldiers had gone around the countryside to demand potatoes from the farmers and peasants and had controlled their delivery.

The fate of these stocks, by all the reports, is that they were 'lost'. According to *Soziale Praxis*, most of the army stocks in the occupied territories were lost because of the ill-considered terms of the armistice. Those brought home 'shared the fate of many communal food deposits. They were distributed without authorization, squandered, or plundered by the soldiers themselves, by the local Soldiers' and Workers' Councils or by marauders masquerading in their guise'. The anonymous author of this account saw these 'anarchic' deeds as a threat to destroy administration, trade, and commerce, disrupting the return to civil life and the feeding of the urban populations. The French Secret Service reported on 13 January 1919 that 'immense stocks have become the loot of the soldiers, who are to be seen in all the large towns of Germany as well as Berlin, selling cocoa, tea, flour, potatoes which are punctually delivered'. The report claimed that life was tolerable because numerous decrees aimed at food hoarding were *not* being enforced, bringing illegally

⁵⁰ Wilhelm Necker, oral interview, tapes and transcripts from the present writer.

hidden stocks to light. Viewed in a different and longer perspective, the workers' and soldiers' Councils 'kept the administrative machinery in operation when otherwise mistrust against discredited public officials would have prevented the exercise of authority and thereby caused anarchy and starvation'.⁵¹

3. Blockaded Food Supplies and Internal Conflict

Given the reduced amounts of food available to the German population, the actions of the Councils in relieving starvation was of necessity a stop-gap measure against the worsening effects of the continuing blockade. After their independent efforts in maintaining food supplies, distribution fell back upon the price mechanisms that had so obviously failed during the war.

The position of workers' families worsened as the Cabinet demobilization decrees issued on 7 and 12 November to reduce the labour market-disruption resulting from demobilization, instructed employers and unions to relocate millions of men in their normal peacetime occupations. As a result, approximately five million women were made unemployed in the first two months of 1919.⁵²

After the decrees, in those households dependent jointly upon a soldier's pay and a woman's wage, one income less was forthcoming. These decrees were strengthened on 27 November 1918 by the addition of exemplary powers leading to heavy fines or five years' imprisonment against anyone who challenged them.⁵³ With the enforcement of the demobilization decrees and the dwindling of food stocks, the powers of the Councils appeared to be considerably reduced. However, the continuing impact of the crisis of food shortages under the duress of the blockade threw their work and their paid staffs into confrontations with their own Government. The disunity among left and right social democrats in the first weeks of the revolution deepened as a result.

The outgoing Cabinet of Prince Max von Baden declared on 4 November 1918, in an announcement signed by von Waldow, the Food Minister, that the peace would soon improve the food supply, but this was refuted by Waldow's own office on 7 November. On 6 November the executive of the MSPD warned against using Bolshevik methods to secure food supplies. Unrest, it was warned, would completely block undelivered stocks of food. Workers would die of starvation if force was used. What had happened in Russia had altered nothing and had allowed the food owners to carry on helping themselves.⁵⁴ On 9 November Ebert appealed to the officials and authorities of the old regime to work with the 'new men' to avoid civil war

⁵¹ Carl Landauer, *European Socialism*, (Los Angeles, 1959), i. 1128 n. 37.

⁵² Thönnessen, *The Emancipation of Women*, pp. 62, 84.

⁵³ Walter Kaskel, *Das neue Arbeitsrecht* (Berlin, 1920), p. 5.

⁵⁴ *Ursachen und Folgen vom deutschen Zusammenbruch, 1918-1945* (Berlin, n.d.), ii.

and famine. He warned that the war had seriously jeopardized food supplies and everyone should assist, not hinder, their delivery to the cities. Shortages, plunder, and robbery would lead to misery for the poor, and industrial workers would be the hardest hit. He urged his fellow citizens to 'leave the streets'.

On the same day, the MSPD rejected the USPD's conditions for joining the new Cabinet, that demanded the removal of all the old bourgeois ministers and their substitution by elected delegates of soldiers' and workers' Councils, on the grounds that to do so 'would seriously jeopardize our capacity to feed the people, if not make that task impossible'.⁵⁵ After abandoning these conditions, Herr Wurm of the USPD was appointed Secretary of State for Food in the New Cabinet formed as 'the Council of Peoples' Commissars'.

Despite their efforts to prevent it, the MSPD and the Soldiers' and Workers' Council for Berlin decreed a general strike on 9 November but on the following day ordered all transport and food workers not to take part. On 11 November the MSPD-controlled Berlin Council urged workers, soldiers, and fellow citizens to 'follow all instructions of *the new state and its functionaries*'. Two days later this was contradicted by an order declaring that all SWCs in Greater Berlin, which had assumed certain administrative functions, were now defunct. They should give way to the existing communal, state, federal, and military authorities. Proclamations concerning alimentation should not be issued unless they bore the signatures of the chairmen of the Berlin Council. The central MSPD-USPD administration promised, using the old methods of control, to try and ensure a regulated food supply for the population.

The promises and proclamations of early November did not put an end to the independent activities of the Councils in dealing with the food shortages. On 23 November all councils in Germany were warned that by taking 'steps on their own, from a purely local point of view, in matters of food supply and raw materials supply', they were rendering government measures ineffective. Old regime officials should be allowed to carry out their duties. Arrests by soldiers' councils, or confiscations of food, coal, or money, should take place only with agreement from the authorities. Tampering with the food stores intended for communal organizations, the army, or other public bodies should not be countenanced.⁵⁶

Ignoring this order, the SWC in Düsseldorf gave instructions to all factories and works canteens to register their food stocks. Company premises were searched and workers' detachments seized large quantities of hoarded food, which stabilized the food supply situation for a short period.⁵⁷ In other parts of the Ruhr, Dortmund, Gelsenkirchen, and Wanne, the Councils instructed security guards to investigate black-market dealing and confiscated food stocks

⁵⁵ John Riddell, *The German Revolution and the Debate on Soviet Power* (New York, 1986), p. 46.

⁵⁶ Burdick and Lutz, *Political Institutions*, p. 59.

⁵⁷ Tampke, *Ruhr and Revolution*, p. 75.

from private houses, small companies, and shops. But the effect on their action was reported as limited, as the MSPD protected the big companies, where most black-market food was held, against such activities. Distribution of food stocks seized by the Councils was, however, in many cases, handed over under their control to the local authorities, particularly those in the large cities that were feeding hundreds of thousands of people in communal kitchens. In the highly unionized industrial conurbations, control of food distribution was one of the tasks of the *Zentralarbeitsgemeinschaft*, jointly regulated by top-level employers associations and trade unions. In reality, however, the arrangements made by the ZAG were dominated by Colonel Koeth, *Reichsminister* for Economic Demobilization, who failed to prevent the unregulated price explosion that followed the return of food control to the old state authorities.⁵⁸ After the secession of the USPD from the Cabinet on 29 December 1918, the administration reverted to the wartime arrangements for mutual dependency and civil peace with the High Command. This dependency had been covertly in progress from the very beginning, between Ebert and Gröner. In its authorization of activities initiated by the Officer Corps, it was challenged by the representatives of the soldiers' Councils at the Congress of the Councils called for 16 December, where the MSPD hoped to win a united majority on the basis of a call for the Councils to surrender their authority to an elected assembly. Lewinsohn, MSPD delegate from the 4th Army western front soldiers' Councils, originally based in Belgium, addressed the Congress, calling on the duty of the Councils to prevent plundering, 'which soiled the flag of the Revolution'. Lewinsohn argued for the restoration of the powers of the High Command expressly for the purpose of negotiating the armistice. The Congress rejected this policy and demanded continued authority for the Councils over the High Command.

Both the MSPD and the generals condemned this demand and opposed further initiatives by the Councils, but the logic of the new Governments' policy on the food question placed it under a growing dependence upon the Allies. In the words of Ebert's deputy, Scheidemann, on 26 December 1918: 'We must keep on good terms with the Entente, in order to get food supplies from them.' The continuing unrest over food shortages was blamed, however, not solely upon the work of the Councils but on the growing influence of the Spartacists, under whose control they were now allegedly coming.

On 30 December Food Secretary Wurm resigned from the Cabinet, in loyalty to the USPD. He rejected the request to stay in office, because the Spartacus League was interfering with his civil servants in the Zeche area with the consequence that the food industry was suffering. On 8 January 1919 the Spartacists occupied the ration card offices where, according to a proclamation of Ebert and Noske, the Minister of War, they stopped 'the feeding of the soldiers and civilian population'. Three days later the British Red Cross representative in Berlin sent word that unless the Government

⁵⁸ Feldman, *Economic and Social Problems*, p. 20.

parties could bring about a definite improvement in food supplies, the Spartacists could not be eliminated. A British officer in the Inter-Allied Office in Berlin reported that the Government's election programme was 'Peace and Bread', but that there were no results as regards the bread. 'The Spartacists will survive as long as food is short.'

In reality, these reports were as much exaggerated by the Allies as they were by the MSPD. The Spartacists were following, not initiating, the direct actions of the SWCs, among which their support was very low. In October 1918 there were only fifty Spartacists in Berlin.⁵⁹ When the members came together nationally on 30 December 1918 to form the German Communist Party, only 112 delegates met, representing 3000 potential Bolsheviks in a movement of SWCs that reflected the activities of millions of people.⁶⁰

The more serious threat to the MSPD leadership of the new Government came from the continued clashes between the Councils and the 'army in civilian clothes', as the American Colonel Hunt described the national and local state officials upon whom the Ebert administration depended. Centrally, they controlled the *Reichsernährungsamt* or National Food Office, which under the High Command had drawn up wartime production targets, price-fixing, rationing, and the distribution systems of the local Food Offices.

This office initiated legal actions to recover control of food stocks. In response, some left-wing urban and city Councils, in their political immaturity, turned to separatism, to maintain local control on the food issue. On 25 November 1918, Heise, the leader of the short-lived reign of the Councils in Hamburg, fearing the loss within three weeks of the city's food stocks, sought to resolve the problem by asking the British to recognize a Hanseatic Republic on the lower Elbe. The reply rejected all dealings with 'mushroom governments'.⁶¹ The programme of the new government of the Councils in Saxony promised to maintain its share of the national food product with the 'most emphatic safeguards'. A call for independence for Upper Silesia on 20 December was based, among other demands, on the insistence that the local farmers' produce should benefit the local state as a priority.⁶² On 19 January 1919, the German Cabinet received a report of a movement in Schleswig-Holstein where local leaders had attempted to create an independent Food Office for the region. Noske's response was to alert the security forces in Keil, declaring that there was no room for separatist tendencies in the Reich.

The Government in Berlin used the promise of the ending of the blockade to resist these movements in the same way that the Councils were resisted, with a combination of legal action, political attacks, and military violence. When the 'Independent Socialist Republic' of Bremen was declared during a

⁵⁹ Riddell, *German Revolution*, p. 30.

⁶⁰ Chris Harman, *The Lost Revolution* (London, 1982), p. 66.

⁶¹ PRO, CAB 23/14, pp. 428-430.

⁶² *Ursachen und Folgen*, iii. 96, 142.

huge demonstration of armed workers on 10 January, the USPD leaders, who had actively supported it, withdrew when they were warned by the local press that acceptance of its regime would hold up the delivery of US food supplies to Germany.⁶³

Not all the efforts to remove food control from Berlin were based upon separatist policies. Others were built upon right-wing nationalist groups. The attempts of the local *Bürgerschaft* in many areas, in response to strong pressures from landowners and industrialists to organize *Notsgemeinschaften*, or emergency working parties, were founded upon opposition to the left-wing-influenced Councils. In the town of Kulmbach in Saxony this organization took over the tasks of supplying coal and food from the SWC, whose work had been disrupted by violent anti-socialist groups.⁶⁴ In Coburg, similar developments followed the realization that food stocks replenished by the Allies after the raising of the blockade still left the region at the mercy of Berlin. Coburg's population voted to link up with Bavaria, after the Berlin-directed *Reichswehr* had suppressed its secessionist Council Republic with extreme violence.⁶⁵ Protection in the rural areas against the confiscatory activities of the Councils was undertaken by *Einwohnerwehren* thanks to which, according to a German communication to the British Foreign Office in late July 1919, 'the rule of the Councils in Bavaria had not spread and was finally suppressed'. That Bavaria had ever become short of food was itself a reminder of the power of the blockade.

The failure of the Berlin authorities generally to improve the food situation after the depletion of the food stocks recovered and distributed by the Councils, led to a rapid increase in conflicts with organized workers that came to a head in February and March 1919. Strikes in the heavy industrial areas broke out demanding shorter hours because, as the unions insisted, the diet had become so poor that miners could only manage to work for six hours per day. In February in Hamburg an attempted confiscation of military food stores was later punished by Noske's forces. In late June 1919 Hamburg again saw protests, on that occasion over adulterated food, in which women took a leading part, but which were used by Noske as a justification for the military occupation of the city.⁶⁶

The continued food blockade, intended by the Allies for the elimination of civil disorder, encouraged sections of Germany's defeated Officer Corps to use it as a tactic in waging civil war. There is evidence, as later claimed by the social democrat editor in exile, Bernhard Menne, that the officials of the

⁶³ Harman, *Lost Revolution*, p. 101, quoting from *Illustrierte Geschichte der deutschen Revolution* (Berlin, 1929, repr. Frankfurt-am-Main, 1970), p. 342.

⁶⁴ R. F. Hoppood, 'Mobilization of a Nationalist Community, 1919-1923', *German History*, 10/2 (1992), p. 153.

⁶⁵ N. F. Hayward, *The Politics of a German Town in the Weimar Republic* (M. Phil. thesis (1986), Sheffield Hallam University), pp. 30-1.

⁶⁶ Richard A. Comfort, *Revolutionary Hamburg* (Stanford, Ca., 1966), pp. 75-6.

old regime in collusion with the remnants of the High Command applied an internal food blockade against the dissident regions that resisted the dissolution of the Councils. Jürgen Tampke provides evidence for this in his work on the Ruhr revolt in 1919. Food supplies were withheld during the Ruhr general strike and from its supporting workers in central Germany and Upper Silesia, in order to induce them to surrender to occupation by the *Freikorps*.

In Halle, the City Food Office was closed for the issue of ration cards by a *Bürgerstreik* against the administration of the USPD-dominated workers' Councils and re-opened only after these had surrendered to Maercker's *Landesjägerskorps*. Menne saw in these actions the manipulation of food supplies for entire towns by the reactionary military caste operating through their own bureaucracy under the facade of the young Republic.⁶⁷ The complicity of the MSPD in these attacks, mainly directed against working-class neighbourhoods, was reported by other observers, notably the British reporter M. Phillips Price and by the MSPD Deputy Commandant of Berlin, Anton Fischer. The consequences of the blockade strategy, far from eliminating the power of German militarism after its collapse, in practice very quickly nourished its regeneration in a civil war against the soldiers' and workers' Councils that cost 15,000 lives in the first nine months of 1919.⁶⁸ From January to June 1919, the 'bourgeois socialist' Government intensified its legal, political, and military onslaught against the Councils, whatever their political orientation, until they were effectively suppressed in time for the signing of the Versailles Peace Treaty on 28 June 1919.

4. Blockade, the Continuation of War by other Means and its Consequences

The British and American Governments were aware, before the armistice, of the nature of the threat of revolution in Germany. They feared the extension of the Soviet system and of the westward spread of Bolshevism. Britain's political leaders were more alarmed at the prospects than were their military colleagues. At the meeting of War Cabinet on 10 November, Winston Churchill observed, in the light of the revolution in Berlin on the previous day, that 'we might have to build up the German army and not destroy the only police force for maintaining order in Germany, as it was important to get Germany on her legs again for fear of the spread of Bolshevism'. Lloyd George considered that Germany was like a cholera area infected with the virus of Bolshevism. 'It would be most undesirable to march British miners to Westphalia if Westphalia was controlled by a Bolshevik organization.'⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Menne, *Armistice*, p. 29.

⁶⁸ M. Phillips Price, *Germany in Transition* (London, 1923), pp. 27–35. Meerwarth's figure of 14,314 military deaths suggests an even higher total.

⁶⁹ PRO CAB 23/14, WC 550a, pp. 310–301, 10 Nov. 1918.

During the armistice talks Marshall Foch reported that the German negotiators made clear to him that Germany was on the verge of Bolshevism 'and that we ourselves will be subsequently invaded by the same scourge'.⁷⁰ After signing the armistice, the Germans made direct appeals to President Wilson, requesting him 'to bring about a preliminary peace at once, in order to prevent anarchy and famine and immediately to allow a German commission to visit America for the purchase of necessary foodstuffs'.

These messages attempted both to drive a wedge between America and its European allies and to offer the new democratic Germany as a bulwark against the westward spread of Bolshevism. Ebert made it clear that the sending of food without delay could be conditional upon a guarantee of its equitable distribution and the maintenance of public order in Germany. Wilson's reply warned Germany that she had better have a settled government to sign the peace treaty. As the influential French newspaper *Le Temps* pointed out on 15 November, Ebert would have a powerful weapon against dissident socialists if he could say to them 'the President will not send supplies unless you allow me to maintain order'.

The official observers from Britain sent to Germany between mid-December 1918 and April 1919, to verify German statements at the armistice negotiations that famine was imminent in Germany, were instructed to confirm whether the food shortages would lead to starvation and thus create a 'tendency to increase Bolshevism'. Most of them reported that Germany as a whole was on the verge of starvation, and that Bolshevism was feared if the food was not delivered urgently from overseas. Their visit was followed by a fact-finding mission to Germany for Winston Churchill's War Department. It stated that most essential foods in Germany would run out in early spring, while the harvest for 1919 would yield only half of the average pre-war crop. Though conditions were stable enough for food redistribution, famine or Bolshevism would ensue if relief were not forthcoming. The report, dated 16 February 1919, concluded that '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.'

The British government proposed, in a memorandum of reply to US proposals for the relief of liberated, neutral, and enemy territories, that any relief organization 'should be conceived in such a way that during the especially troubled period through which we are passing, it will be a means of safeguarding and organising peoples menaced by social disruption'. Such supplies ought to appear 'as the first beneficent application of the great principles which govern the policies of the Associated governments'. Several stipulations were made by the Allies for the control of food relief. It should be applied through the blockade machinery but the Americans, as holders of the largest

⁷⁰ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, p. 146.

food surpluses in the world,⁷¹ argued that a distinction should be made between a general blockade as a substitute for military occupation and a controlled relief programme aimed at particular political objectives. Before it was agreed to supply Germany, William Bullitt, adviser to President Wilson, recommended the immediate relief of starving Vienna and Bohemia, under the control of an American directorate. American motives were not simply altruistic. Bullitt noted that 'the administrative agencies which controlled food distribution would automatically obtain the greatest power over the proletariat and the American directors would control the Governments'.⁷² Herbert Hoover was appointed as overall Food Director. It was decided that, as the growth of Bolshevism in Germany emanated from the formation by the proletariat of the SWCs, relief should not be granted to a government of the Councils.

The last of these stipulations was made a condition by the Allies during the five weeks of talks at Spa, leading to the second and third armistice agreements. Allied delegates demanded 'immediate dissolution of the regime of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils and its replacement by a parliamentary system'.⁷³ Ebert informed the Cabinet on 15 January 1919 that his Government was under instruction from the armistice commissioners not to pay funds from the Reich to the SWCs.

In reality, the term relief was a misnomer. Under pressure from the British and the Americans to gain control of Germany's merchant fleet and from the French to sequester its reserves of gold and hard currencies, food was withheld to force the Germans to sign the Brussels agreement of 15 March 1919. No food was delivered before this agreement, by which Germany surrendered her merchant fleet and handed over £100 million in gold marks and £11 million in neutral currencies to the bank of the British consul in Rotterdam. In return, Germany was permitted to purchase 370,000 tons of food per month until September 1919. The French delegation objected to the diversion of German gold from the proposed reparations account to the food account for the payment of relief supplies.

In their report to the British government on food conditions in Germany in April 1919, the physiologist Professor E. H. Starling and C. W. Guillebaud, a Cambridge economist, forecast the results of forcing Germany to pay for its own famine relief with a currency unsupported by gold and hard-currency reserves. 'In the present state of her credit, the purchase of such enormous quantities is quite impossible. Even if she could buy it for marks at their present value, the food would be so expensive that it would be beyond the

⁷¹ Bane and Lutz, *Blockade*, p. 6. US available stocks comprised 9 million tons of grain and 1.3 million tons of fatstuffs.

⁷² Arno J. Mayer, *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking*, (London, 1968), p. 66. Mayer provided no details on the German food situation.

⁷³ Victor Schiff, *The Germans at Versailles* (London, 1930), p. 22. Schiff was one of the German delegates.

reach of the majority of the population, and an attempt to buy with marks would reduce their value to vanishing point'.⁷⁴

Subsequent meetings of the Superior Economic Council and of the Allied Foreign ministers revealed the Brussels agreement lacked feasibility. Herbert Hoover stated that Germany would require \$300 million worth of food in the following three months, yet had only \$40 million of revenues with which to pay for this amount. In private, he told Lord Robert Cecil, Minister of Blockade, of his doubts about the ability of the Allies to meet their commitments under the Brussels agreement. The promised quantities of food should have amounted to 2.2 million tons of food by the end of September 1919. By the time of the harvest only 622,000 tons had been delivered, less than six weeks' supply.⁷⁵

During the negotiations for the Brussels agreement, Lloyd George criticized the French demand to sequester Germany's money supply. He itemized the appalling consequences of the policy that he nevertheless continued to favour. 'So far, not a single ton of food had been sent into Germany.' Germany's fishing fleet had been prevented from catching a few herrings and though the Allies were on top, the memories of starvation would sow hatred for the future and would 'hand people over to the arguments of the Spartacists'. Citing the revolution in Bavaria, he argued for the need to maintain order in Germany as a breakwater between the countries of the Allies and the waters of revolution beyond. On 8 March 1919, the commander of the British Army of the Rhine urged the immediate delivery of food into this area as mortality amongst women, children, and the sick was spreading. The population felt 'that an end by bullets is preferable to death by starvation. All this naturally results in great activity by subversive and disorderly elements'.⁷⁶

A. J. Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary during the armistice period, summed up the value to British interests of the continuation of the blockade. In a joint War Office and Foreign Office memorandum, prepared on 21 January 1919, he argued that it would speed the signing of the peace treaty and unite the Allies. It would help to control the prices of Germany's food imports and prevent them from going mostly to the rich. Most importantly, it would provide a direct supply of food and raw materials to those provinces and proletariats resisting Bolshevism.⁷⁷ In the uncertainties of revolution, this latter explanation revealed the underlying intentions of relief by blockade. The War Office believed that the blockade was a substitute for war that would facilitate the speed-up of the demobilization of the British army of occupation and at the same time enable the victorious powers 'to avoid the danger of

⁷⁴ Cmd. 280, p. 13

⁷⁵ Offer, *Agrarian Interpretation*, p. 302.

⁷⁶ Bane and Lutz, *Blockade*, p. 214. Minutes of the Supreme War Council, 8 Mar. 1919.

⁷⁷ PRO TI 12275, f. no. 3398, memoranda from Foreign Office, Admiralty, War Office, Restriction of Enemy Supplies Department to Treasury, Board of Trade, and Department of Overseas Trade.

complete Bolshevism in Germany' by ensuring that the distribution of food and other supplies would remain under their control.

As early as 1 October 1918, Lenin, observing developments in Germany, attempted to strengthen the revolution by delivering Russian bread to the masses. He urged upon the Central Committee of the Soviets the need to prepare a fraternal alliance of bread and military aid. 'Ten times more effort to secure grain by cleaning out all stocks both for ourselves and for the German workers', he proposed.⁷⁸

In opposition to such overtures, Ebert expressly ruled out aid from the Soviets for revictualling the people. An offer of two trainloads of grain from Russia was rejected on 17 November 1918, in favour of much larger amounts promised from America but not delivered for another four months. The historian of the Bolshevik revolution, E. H. Carr, an official in the blockade ministry at the time, later argued that it would have been 'quixotic' of the Social Democrats in Germany to choose otherwise, as plainly an acceptance of Soviet aid would have ruled out US aid.⁷⁹ In the four months' delay before the arrival of US food, support for Ebert among the Councils, particularly in the industrial cities, switched significantly towards the left, to the temporary benefit of the USPD. The severity of the food crisis kept the influence of the Councils and their constituents in a state of opposition to the elected government of the Republic for many months after their finances were withdrawn in March 1919, when they were reduced to the status of merely advisory bodies. The struggle over food and its escalating prices turned into a series of bitter confrontations, as a result of which the MSPD coalition with the centre-right parties faced nearly 5000 strikes in over fifty factories throughout 1919.⁸⁰ In the January 1919 election, right and left Social Democrats shared 14 million votes in the ratio of five to one, while the bourgeois parties shared out 16.5 million votes. In June 1920 the MSPD and the USPD divided 11 million votes by six to five. Within five years of the ending of the food blockade, the two parties that the Councils had originally supported lost 50 per cent of the votes they had received during the most severe point of the food shortages. More than 5 million votes switched eventually to the German Communist Party, the successors to the Spartacists. Viewed from this perspective alone, the policy of support for the 'bourgeois-socialist republic' that underpinned the allied food blockade was a failure of ominous proportions.

Despite the initial intentions of the blockade planners, the power of the German military machine was soon reasserted. Its right-wing proclivities were made clear by Sir James Edmonds, who reported that as early as May 1919 Colonel Bauer of the German High Command asked how the British Military

⁷⁸ Riddell, *German Revolution*, p. 26.

⁷⁹ E. H. Carr, *Conditions of Peace* (London, 1942), p. 225.

⁸⁰ Harman, *Lost Revolution*, pp. 145-6.

Governor of Cologne would respond to a proposal to 'drive out' the *Reichstag*. Not with equanimity, was the reply.⁸¹

Conclusion

The records of the British and German governments during the blockaded food crisis provide sufficient evidence for the clarification of a number of historical assumptions. Whether or not the evidence confirms precisely the extent of the famine and its consequences, it does show that the epoch-making actions of the soldiers' and workers' Councils are explicable not only as the expression of their anger at the disastrous ending to the war, but as a response to the threat of hunger to large sections of the civilian population that it continued to bring. That population damage from the threat of famine was lessened in the first six months of 1919 can be attributed, directly or indirectly, to the activities of the Councils. Fear of famine is a condition of famine, and it was not simply present, as Offer suggests, as a pawn to be deployed by the groups contending for power in the period of the collapse.

The support for the MSPD in the SWC movement was unsustainable in the light of the declaration by the party's executive, warning against 'Russian' methods as a solution to food scarcities, no matter how temporary their application. The potential for power gained by the Councils during the struggle to share out food stocks equally, was weakened by their initial readiness to accept the MSPD's policy of redistribution using the old machinery of the state, the reform of which could proceed only through Parliamentary elections. When the USPD abandoned its original demand for 'All power to the Councils', its division became inevitable and deprived the Councils of a coherent leadership in the face of MSPD attacks on their activities. The short-lived alliance of the MSPD, the bourgeois politicians, and the defeated generals was determined to justify its recognition by the Allies as the only legitimate power in the defeated nation, no matter how onerous the armistice and peace terms that were imposed upon the German people. The Councils' insistence upon autonomous direct action in rectifying the gross disparities of food distribution in a famine developed into a clash between socialistic demands for equality that challenged the powers of the old state, and the social-democratic desire for continuity through the gradual reform of existing state structures. The Councils case for equality of food supplies in a famine was never fully tested by electoral contest, though by strike action and the transfer of votes to the far-left, millions showed their resentment at the failure of the war-time coalition parties to secure a fair system of food distribution. Though the Councils failed to consolidate their alternative methods against the parliamentary proposals of the MSPD, the solutions to chronic hunger

⁸¹ General Sir James Edmonds, *The Occupation of the Rhineland* (London, 1987), p. 35 n. 2.

that they had demonstrated were subsequently emulated in many working-class districts during the short and turbulent life of the Weimar Republic. With the defeat of the Councils, the immediate prospects for political stability in post-war Germany receded, as Council supporters in the proletariat for the KPD, the Communist successors to the Spartacists, grew in number to many millions of voters.

Further evidence of the polarizing consequences of the Allied food blockade was demonstrated within nine months of its lifting, in the aftermath to the Kapp Putsch of 1920. Faced with an attack on democracy by a substantial section of the German military machine, British denial of 'equanimity' settled into passivity, as General Watters 'with his little *Freikorps* of 120,000 men' went into the Ruhr to suppress those who demanded that Parliament should bring the putschists to trial. General Sir James Edmonds commented that 'our late adversaries could have any form of government they desired', but clearly it should contain no element of direct control by the proletariat.⁸²

⁸² Ibid. 206.