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Our Daily Bread: Food, Culture and Power in Occupied Germany 1945-1949

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Food, its consumption and acquisition, can be seen as a metaphor for power in post war Germany. For many Germans, life was subsumed by the struggle to feed themselves and their dependants. Consequently, a lack of authority over their own lives is reflected in their allotted rations and subsequent diet. It can be argued that the cultural and political reverberations of British food policy were one of the greatest challenges for the Control Commission as they tried to balance German recovery with innumerable other demands. British bureaucrats monitoring German public opinion found that 'of all the German problems it is the most vital and will continue to be so for some years. The Germans are obsessed with the difficulties of acquiring food.'[1] Unsurprisingly, Patricia Meehan, a welfare worker in the British Zone who later became a documentary maker and author on the occupation, deemed food to be one of the 'most critical and contentious elements' of the period.[2] To understand the significance of food as a symbol of power in the sphere of everyday life, it is helpful to include a brief outline of the food situation in post war Germany.[3]

Before the end of hostilities, an Anglo-American Committee on German Food Supplies had delved into food and farming conditions in Germany and found them to be satisfactory in terms of projected rations.[4] Subsequently, with the establishment of S.H.A.E.F (Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force), in Germany it was anticipated that areas under their command would become self supporting provided that the Military

[1] B. Ruhn von Oppen (ed) *'Royal Institute of Foreign Affairs: Documents on Germany Under Occupation, 1945-1954 '* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1955) p254.
[2] P. Meehan '*A Strange Enemy People'* (London, Peter Owen, 2001) p104.
[3] For a detailed account of how the politics of food shaped the British occupation see J.E. Farquharson *'The Western Allies and the Politics of Food: Agrarian Management in Post-war Germany'* (Leamington Spa, Berg, 1985).
[4] W. Klatt *'Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944- Food and Farming in Germany: I. Food and Nutrition'* (London, HMSO, 1950) p46.

Government could ensure effective use of existing resources. When planning the daily ration for Germans living in the British Zone, the working principle was based on the conviction that no German should have more to eat than the people of the liberated countries. Initially, a level of 2,000 calories a day was considered but early in 1945 a directive was issued reducing this to 1,550 calories a day. This figure was the absolute minimum to maintain health for a period not exceeding six months.[5] In essence, it was agreed that no German should have a dietary advantage over the people they had previously kept short.[6] Under the terms of this policy no relief supplies were to be dispatched to Germany to feed the German people and imports were forbidden.[7] According to Donnison, such inflexible thinking was intended to teach the Germans a lesson in civilised behaviour 'the Allies had no intention of feeding the people of Germany whose daily diet for the better part of five years, had been assured by the depredation of the occupied territories.'[8] The scenario predicted by SHAEF was aggravated early on by the realisation that Germany could not be treated as a single economic unit whein food supplies from the east (the Soviet Zone) became inadmissible.[9] As a result, the food situation deteriorated making wheat imports inevitable in order to maintain official rations. By electing to occupy and thus determine the future of Germany; the Allies had taken on responsibility for the welfare of the population. Britain's food policy in Germany exposed one of the paradoxes of the ideology that drove the occupation and its long term objectives. If the British wished to set a good example of how democratic principles worked in practice then they were obliged to make a positive impression yet, the effect of rebuffing the German people in their need for food sent this plan into reverse.[10] If only for these reasons, Britain had a responsibility to feed the German people, a task that proved to be overwhelming and exposed the shortcomings of the administration. The capability of feeding the German population had been a cause for concern in Britian during the planning stages of the occupation. The British had rightly feared that a prolonged period of decentralised government would mean 'economic dependence on costly imports from outside Europe at the occupier's expense'.[11] For the British this was a situation they wished to avoid but the 'parlous state of British flour stocks' and the scaling down of cereal imports resulted in having to procure wheat

[5] Ibid pp46-7.
[6] F.S.V. Donnison *'History of the Second World War: Civil Affairs and Military Government, North West Europe 1944-1946'* (London, HMSO, 1961) p328.
[7] Ibid p457.
[8] Ibid p327.
[9] W. Klatt '*Food and Farming in Germany'* p47.
[10] H. Feis *'Between War and Peace: The Potsdam Conference'* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1960) p53.
[11] J.E. Farquharson 'The British Occupation of Germany 1945-6: A Badly Managed Disaster Area?' *German History* **11** (1993) pp316-338.

from Canada, a percentage of which would be shipped to the British Zone.[12] In the end, feeding the German people was inextricably linked to how much the Allies were willing or able to pay for, as well as the availability of food supplies.

The official analysis of the food situation in Germany was one of expediency and one expert opinion in an Intelligence Report from 1945 conjectured that the despite repeated warnings from the British, it was the German people themselves who were unable to judge that the food situation was serious and 'starvation may be their lot.'[13] Evidently, material hardships were assumed to be a natural offshoot of defeat and being surrounded by a starving and emasculated population that presented no discernible threat reinforced this notion. In the unpredictable environment of post war Germany, the victors could not afford to be too complacent however as, according to Montgomery, feeding the German people was seen as a crucial element in maintaining order. Montgomery foresaw dire consequences if German rations were curtailed, his fear turned out to be groundless but the sentiment was real, 'I must make it clear that the food situation is more critical now than at any time since we entered Germany. Consequences for any reduction of ration would be most serious, particularly in the industrial areas of the British Zone.'[14] His solution was to deploy the B.A.O.R. for the 'Battle of Winter'. Their objective was to maintain order in the British Zone during the harsh conditions of the winter months. To Montgomery the defeated German people constituted a benign presence, in a progress review from 1945, he judged them to be 'docile and well behaved' but warned that a severe lack of food could see them into aggressors once again. The thrust of his message was that the British could not afford to take risks and that the military should be ready to protect vulnerable sites such as food depots. In short, British policy dictates of eroding the minimal ration for the German people and then fixating on the potential consequences of low morale induced by these shortages seems contradictory. As it turned out, British insight and responses to the food crisis varied depending on political persuasion, awareness of the problem and the ability to make a difference.

Numerous eyewitness accounts of post war conditions in Germany refer to starving Germans and suggest that more could have been done by the British to alleviate this situation.[15] One American observer was particularly

[12] R.J. Hammond '*Studies in Administration and Control: Food, Volume 3'* (London, HMSO, 1962) pp547-8.

[13] FO 1038/99.

[14] British Zone Review November 24 1945.

[15] To cite a few of these accounts, Fenner Brockway *'German Diary'* (London, Victor Gollanz, 1946), Victor Gollancz '*In Darkest Germany'* (London, Victor Gollancz, 1947), Ethel Mannin *'German Journey'* (London, Jarrold, 1948) and Patricia Meehan *'A Strange Enemy People'*

scathing in her assessment of the separation between victor and vanquished denouncing the Allies for 'eating well and driving around whilst the natives starved or walked.'[16] The dividing line between the Germans and the Allies was less marked for those Germans who found ways to ease the burden of impoverishment. Mrs Howells, a young German woman who later married a British serviceman, remarked that 'those with connections' were able to live better than those who did not and that a system of inequality prevailed amongst Germans.[17] This is borne out by Ethel Mannin who noted that well to do Germans with something to barter could supplement their very basic rations on the black market but the sick; the elderly and war widows faced a diet that was 'a daily experience of dull and devitalising misery.'[18] Ethel Mannin's description of the 'drawn yellow faces of the Ruhr' epitomises the distinction between the inhabitants of rural and industrial areas separated as they were by unequal access to a healthy diet.[19]

The physical characteristics of the British Zone contributed to German dissatisfaction as those living in rural areas tended to be better fed and there were less of them to feed. Urban areas were more acutely affected by a scarcity of food and relied heavily on their own ingenuity to get by. Official British sources noted this; one report carried a vivid picture of how discrepancies in the German food chain governed daily life.

> In the towns sufficient food is only obtained at the cost of time-wasting expeditions to the countryside. It is usual in the late afternoon to find strings of bicycles carrying sacks of vegetables and stretching many miles along the roads leading to the larger towns. At the Krupp locomotive works at Essen the day ends at 3.30 to enable the men to forage in farms and allotments.[20]

Whilst the British government intended no maltreatment, they failed to meet the basic needs of the German population which had long lasting consequences. According to Sabine Lee, the problems facing Germany after the war were exaggerated in the British Zone. One reason for this was the high population density in the Ruhr contrasted with a low ratio of agricultural land. Hence, administration of the British Zone in terms of carrying out routine policies such as feeding the population was

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all visited or lived in the British Zone during the occupation and expressed deep concern on witnessing first hand the meagre rations on which the German people were expected to survive.

[16] F. Utley *'The High Cost of Vengeance'* (Chicago, Henry Regnery, 1948) p43.

[17] Interview with Mrs Howells October 2005.

[18] E. Mannin *'German Journey'* p144.

[19] Ibid p144.

[20] B. Ruhn von Oppen (ed) *'Documents on Germany Under Occupation'* p254.

'exceptionally difficult.'[21] Food for the Germans had to be provided somehow and faced with widespread hunger and poverty Britain's priorities in Germany seemed conflicting and confused. British sources discerned that a lack of transport and the black market hindered fair and reliable methods of feeding the German people but accepted that 'the supply of food presents a sombre picture.'[22] John Farquharson suggests that by the spring of 1946 Britain's disastrous food policy became a catalyst in the decline of British status in Germany with Britain becoming a 'junior partner' to the Americans. [23] Werner Klatt, another commentator on food, believed that the food situation was tolerable until 1946 a year that witnessed more ration cuts and when 'the first serious signs of malnutrition became evident and industrial output declined.'[24] When confronted with the escalating food crisis the British response was not one of immediate action. In the spring of 1946 a message carrying righteous undertones appeared in the British Zone Review absolving the British of responsibility, 'in a hungry world, in which every country is competing with its neighbour for the necessities of life, the vanquished aggressors cannot hope to fare well.'[25]

It was at this time that the British had to face the very real prospect of riots and disturbances amongst the German people. A temporary answer was the introduction of differential rations to alleviate food shortages in the larger towns but a more permanent solution was the signing of the Bevin-Byrnes Agreement signalling the formation of Bizonia.[26] Economic fusion was intended to be the first step towards the recovery of the German economy and consequently, restrictions on imports were lifted to promote an increase in living standards. However, it is worth mentioning that even with the merger of the British and American Zones to form 'Bizonia' in January 1947, the British continued to report on 'difficulties' in industrial areas posed by low German morale and related food protests. As late as June 1947 miners were protesting over the lack of potatoes, potatoes were a staple for coal miners, and in Schleswig- Holstein a staged sit-down occurred in nine major towns.[27] It was to be expected that these demonstrations occurred in urban areas given that town and city dwellers were the hardest hit by food shortages. Working class Germans felt united

[21] S. Lee *'Victory in Europe: Britain and Germany Since 1945'* (Harlow, Longman and Pearson, 2001) p263.
[22] B. Ruhn von Oppen (ed) *'Documents on Germany Under Occupation'* p254. Moreover, Werner Klatt '*Food and Farming in Germany'* p49 argues that those trading goods were better off than those observing regulations in that the farmer who sold a ton of grain to the local collecting centre received greater payment than the farmer who sold a pound of butter on the black market.
[23] J.E. Farquharson *'The Western Allies and the Politics of Food'* p1.
[24] W. Klatt '*Food and Farming in Germany'* p48.
[25] British Zone Review 13 March 1946.
[26] Ibid p49.
[27] FO 1049/1002.

in their loss and brought their feelings to bear on the British authorities. Likewise, sections of the German people remained unconvinced by British assurances as their basic ration was not always met and they 'frequently asserted that the food shortage was part of British policy.'[28] In all of this, the impetus on the British occupiers was to lead by example despite the fundamental disparity in lifestyles; exporting democracy to Germany had to be seen to be irreproachable. In reality, the interface of the two populations exposed inconsistencies in British policy relating to food which is both explicitly and unconsciously revealed in public debates and personal testimonies.

British government employees in Germany were living well and this is echoed by the testimonies of British women. Ironically in order to attract staff and boost the morale of those already engaged in the British Zone, living conditions and rations had to be favourable.[29] In contrast, the miserable lifestyle of many Germans, shaped by a scarcity of food, led to a drop in their morale leading to left wing politicians and activists in Britain to question the validity and purpose of the British government in Germany.[30] Their reactions were provoked by a proposal in January 1946 to cut the minimum allowance of 1,500 calories which was a sign that the food situation was worsening. The plight of the German people was taken up by Jennie Lee M.P. who equated feeding the Germans fairly with enabling Germany to re-establish itself as a civilised nation.[31] A flawed distribution system contributed to this problem as discrepancies between town and country widened and was duly noted by a government select committee in 1946. They found that food distribution was unequal to needs, malnutrition being confined to industrial areas whereas in country areas the population was 'moderately well fed.'[32] It is evident that the ability to feed oneself and ones family hinged on location as well as commercial and social connections. Inconsistencies in who got what to eat centred on the ability to supplement the allotted ration through the Black Market or by foraging for food. This process, known as 'hamstering' was widespread and involved

[28] FO 1006/269.

[29] During this period, rationing was still in place in Britain. For an overview of how the British were managing at home see the chapter on 'Making Do' in P. Addison *'Now the War is Over: A Social History of Britain 1945-51'* (London, BBC /Jonathan Cape, 1985). Also Susan Cooper's chapter 'Snoek Piquante' on British food shortages in M. Sissons and P. French (eds) *'Age of Austerity'* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986).

[30] 'Save Europe Now' was a persuasive pressure group led by Victor Gollancz with Richard Stokes M.P. being vocal inside parliament. For an assessment of its role see J.E. Farquharson 'Emotional but Influential: Victor Gollancz, Richard Stokes and the British Zone of Germany, 1945-9' *Journal of Contemporary History* **22** (1987) pp 501-519.

[31] Jennie Lee House of Commons Debates 10 May 1946 vol 422 cc1393-4.

[32] '*Eighth Report, Select Committee on Estimates, Session 1946-7, British Expenditure in Germany'* (London, HMSO, 1947) pxiv.

travelling to the country to bargain with farmers or to rummage about the land itself.[33]

Food remained a sensitive issue throughout the occupation and at times defined the gulf between the two populations. Reflecting on conditions in the British Zone, Michael Balfour pinpoints the crux of being British in a country full of troubled people from refugees searching for families to German families living out of suitcases.

> It was easy to wrap oneself in the magic carpet on which the occupation forces lived and forget that all around human beings were existing in utterly different conditions – only to be brought up with a shock and suddenly realise what it must be like to be overcrowded with insufficient and monotonous food.[34]

Food was therefore a distinguishing factor in lifestyle and for the British to overlook German shortages could be seen as a consequence of victory after years of deprivation. This critical facet of occupation life is only really understood by examining the daily lives and routines of the British living and working in Germany. Britain's policy on food undoubtedly had its detractors and has been well researched but food as an expression of status in the British Zone in relation to how British pre-eminence was played out on a daily basis is less understood.

In the British Zone, food performed a social function in that food separated those in need from those with plenty or, at the very least, with sufficient. Michael Balfour makes the salient point that numerous British personnel controlled the things that the Germans wanted most, the fundamentals of life in fact, including food.[35] British rations were not infinite but the British held power and ultimately commanded the amount of food the Germans received. This was considerably less than the British enjoyed as confirmed by a pamphlet distributed to B.A.O.R. families. The pamphlet listed the content and quantities of the German ration precisely, stating 'if you compare this to your ration (the British one) you will find it a very small one,' admitting that 'the food ration is barely sufficient to maintain life.'[36] Hence, for one sector having enough to eat was unproblematic but for the other, especially in urban areas, this presented real difficulties. As Margaret Visser points out in her outstanding book on food etiquette 'everyone

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[33] P. Meehan '*A Strange Enemy People'* p 243-4.
[34] M. Balfour and John Mair *'Survey of International Affairs: Four Power Control in Germany and Austria 1945-1946'* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1956) p113.
[35] M. Balfour and John Mair *'Four Power Control'* p111.
[36] Germany: The Germans and Their Way of Living Information for BAOR families (Private Source).

understands exactly what going without food will mean: food is the great necessity to which we all submit.'[37]

Food in Germany was a gauge of prestige and power. The formalities and rituals of the dining area augmented the status of British personnel. British expectations of what constituted quality service also related to rank and class. Despite assumptions that the Second World War acted as a leveller and disrupted long-established notions of order in British society, dining rituals associated with hierarchy and good breeding would have been very familiar to officers and upper middle class staff.[38] The occupation added a further nuance to this pecking order as Germans replaced British domestic staff, a forceful reminder of victory encountered at close quarters. The circumstances of British messes facilitated a projection of victory through gestures such as employing Germans as kitchen staff and as waiters or waitresses. Confining Germans to the kitchen, sometimes under the supervision of a much younger British girl, served a dual function. Germans, including highly skilled or educated people, could be cheaply employed to carry out menial tasks and this underlined British hegemony in Germany overall. As with the American Zone, power was central to the relationship between the British and the Germans and this extended from the military government's ability to set policy and appoint political officials to the relationships between British staff and German civilians.[39] The British had the authority to oversee the preparation of British food on German soil which only they were permitted to eat. Thus, food carried the distinctive mark of nationhood which was reinforced through the channels of food preparation and its transition to the table.

Within the close knit environment of British bases in Germany, the dining room or mess acted as a focal point for emphasising social and cultural differences through the medium of food. Food was integral to the British position as conquerors chiefly because as occupiers, despite some monotony in their diet, the British did not have to barter for food or face the prospect of hunger oedema. The British received their rations from Britain and the fact that they brought in all their own food resulted in a strict ban being placed on feeding Germans from Allied rations expect for those working for the Allies.[40] Forbidding British personnel to share their food with the German population served to further delineate the two populations. The British were left with the option of feeding German staff through proscribed

[37] M. Visser *'The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners'* (New York, Penguin, 1992) p3.
[38] See H. Smith (ed) *'War and Social Change: British Society in the Second World War'* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1986).
[39] P. Goedde *'G.I.'s and Germans: Culture, Gender and Foreign Relations'* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003) pxxi.
[40] M. Balfour and John Mair *'Four Power Control'* p110.

handouts so that giving away food became a test of their morality. In the post war culture of the British Zone, being generous was a choice the British could make whilst being German could be construed as waiting passively for assistance.[41] The German population were literally holding out their hands at kitchen doors and on the streets waiting for left over food. The degradation of begging for food had the effect of tempering German brutality for some British onlookers. Women could sympathise with other women queuing for food afterall, most of them had experienced shortages in Britian and this assuaged feelings of bitterness. Back in Britain with supplies at 'rock bottom', housewives looked on the Germans much less favourably. One respondent to a Mass Observation survey on Britain's role in helping to feed the German people decided it was the Germans 'turn to do without', a deserved state of affairs in view of 'what they had done.'[42] Whilst walking through a German village, Mrs Lomax witnessed this 'doing without' and could no longer feel resentment:

> I passed a queue of German women waiting for bread; it was supposed to be some kind of black bread. As I passed the queue there was a sort of hissing noise and I thought to myself 'don't run, don't move fast because they've won then.' I was embarrassed but on the other hand I could understand their feelings as well because they were hungry and queuing for bread.[43]

Mrs Lomax recognised that the women's response hinged on her own relatively privileged and well fed position as a Briton walking the streets of their town. This episode taken from Mrs Lomax's testimony offers a rare insight into how the tribulations of German daily life were understood by those set apart from it. Contextualising food as a commodity that separated occupier and occupied adds a dimension of power to British women's responses on the subject of food. Mapping the details of daily life onto the larger narrative of the occupation pinpoints how problematic topics such as food were interpreted at ground level. The politics of food had a huge impact on everyday life. For the Germans government policies on food shaped daily routines such as coming into possession of food which proved to be time-consuming, disheartening and disaffecting. For the British food was always there, despite vacillations in quality, but being surrounded by a hungry indigenous population caused them to reflect on their own position in Germany.

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[41] Petra Goedde's central tenet in *'G.I.'s and Germans'* concerns the transformation of the German people from villains to victims. With the dawning of the Cold War the German population's vulnerability clouded issues relating to their professed aggression and cruelty.
[42] D. Kynaston *'Austerity Britian 1945-51'* (London, Bloomsbury, 2007) p106.
[43] Interview with Mrs Lomax May 2004.

Women's descriptions of eating in Germany indicate both their position as victors and as outsiders coming into contact for the first time with 'foreign food' and their former enemies. A defining factor in the superiority of British women is where and how they ate their meals. All British women working in Germany had their meals provided for them in messes or dining halls so a striking difference to the German people was established through eating. Within British messes the German staff co-existed with the British who in turn were housed and fed in accordance with rank. Dining correctly was an expression of rank which in turn was linked to class. Women's social origins shaped expectations of what constituted 'good' service as well as the ability to recognise cues such as crisp white tablecloths and deferential waiters. Class divisions amongst the British as well as the division between victor and vanquished were played out in the messes and dining rooms of the British Zone. Servicewomen were waited on by local Germans in communal dining areas occasionally to the accompaniment of live music. During her year long stay in Germany, Pam Warren ate all her meals in a hotel dining room that proved to be a 'servicegirls' dream' as the tables were decorated with 'vases of fresh flowers' and the waiters wore 'black tailed coats with boiled white shirts'.[44] Initially Pam Warren was apprehensive about the food that would be cooked by an all German staff but these concerns dissipated after the first meal and the high standard was maintained throughout her stay.[45] Several points arise from her testimony illustrating how the staging of food and its consumption is anchored to the construction of Germans as a defeated, submissive people. For Pam Warren eating in Germany evoked a sense of pleasure and relaxation and the image of her and her fellow W.A.A.F.s being waited on by Germans in starched shirts is enlightening. The contrasting positions of the Germans and the British are vividly defined as the newly arrived women sit down to a meal served and prepared by their former enemies. Women's observations on how they lived in Germany reveal that pampering of this type was commonplace. Dame Felicity Hill ate in a dining room that overlooked gardens whilst an orchestra played on a 'dais every evening at dinner.'[46] Such elaborate dining rituals signify the hierarchy of the occupation, a position the British were anxious to maintain. Hence different combinations of rank, gender and race co-existed with the indigenous people always subordinate. They were employed by the British to prepare, serve and dispose of food that was intended solely for the British.

[44] P. Warren *'The Best of Enemies'* (London, Howard Baker, 1986) p34.
[45] Ibid p34.
[46] Papers of Dame Felicity Hill OBE IWM 86.

Conclusion

Food in post war Germany was synonymous with power as the British, as occupiers, were not going hungry nor seeking food on the black market. Being British in Germany was determined by the ability to make choices and the variety of food and drink at the disposal of the British, although limited by rations and post war economics, was far superior to that of the German people. Through the medium of food, it becomes clear that the alignment of power relations in post war Germany correlated to how the two populations actually lived.

The process of eating food also separated the victors from the vanquished as the establishment of messes and dining rooms was linked to the employment of local Germans to cook and serve for British personnel. Life for the Germans during the early years of the occupation was dominated by inadequate food supplies and the prevalence of the black market during this period highlights the inadequacies of the supply system. Historians have concentrated on the politics of the food situation and its long term implications for the British in Germany, for instance how a lack of faith on all sides resulted in Bizonia, yet food was a defining feature of everyday life in the British Zone. Drawing on eyewitness accounts illustrates how food was an issue that permeated everyday life in Germany and was a subject that many women wrote and talked about years later. Food was the very essence of difference in post war Germany and became a focus of attention for both populations in one form or another. It can be argued that for the British eating meals in pleasant surroundings went some way to restoring normality after the turbulence of the war and this was amplified by the subservient position of their former enemies. Access to nutritious food divided the two communities in the British Zone yet at times had the unforeseen effect of uniting them.

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