

Eat, Drink, and be Merry for Tomorrow We Die: British Food Situation and Public Reaction During World War II

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World War II transformed England's diet drastically, as food consumption was heavily reduced and certain foods rationed. The threat of the Nazis and the need for supplies elsewhere in the world for the Allied war-effort would cause British shipping to be transformed. As food imports decreased, the nation developed a new diet based on certain nutritious foods to be produced in large amounts within England's own borders. The government reacted to these new problems by controlling nearly every facet of food production, distribution, and consumption. England was successful in providing food for the physical needs of its people through new shipping and farming practices, the machinery of the Agricultural Industry, and the Ministry of Food. However, England found much difficulty in providing food that satisfied the Englishman's psychological and emotional need to feel content without diverse and enticing meals.

The threat of the German navy can be clearly seen when one looks to their rates of success early in the war. From 1940 to 1941, there were around 150,000 thousand tons of food and cargo bound for Great Britain lost on the sea due to the German blockade.¹ England lost 11.4 million tons of shipping to Nazi attacks during the entire war.² The Luftwaffe, Germany's air force, also wreaked havoc on England's food supply when it bombed processing and milling plants.³ In May 1941, the aerial

¹ Christopher Driver, *The British at Table, 1940-1980* (London: Hogarth Press, 1983), 17.

² Mancur L. Olson, Jr., *The Economics of Wartime Shortages: A History of British Food Supplies in the Napoleonic War and in World Wars I and II* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1963), 119.

³ Richard James Hammand, *Food and Agriculture in Britain, 1939-1945: Aspects of Wartime Control* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954), 117.

attacks caused the United Kingdom to lose thirteen percent of its ability to mill certain foods.⁴ In addition, the English lost 309,000 tons of food to German air attacks.⁵

The shipping of food supplies into the U.K. from other countries was absolutely essential in feeding the country during peacetime.⁶ Before the war, the British relied on twenty-two million tons of imported foods.⁷ An increase in the size of English cities had caused a reduction in the amount of land available for farming within England.⁸ This led to an even greater dependency upon food imports. In fact, imports made up half of Britain's food supplies.⁹ One-half of all meats eaten in England, and nearly all the fats, four-fifths of its sugar, and nine-tenths of all cereals and flour were imported before the war.¹⁰ England, prior to the war, was a country that relied heavily upon the food of other nations to feed its own countrymen. Therefore, it was imperative that the Nazi U-boat threat to British imports not become a force capable of starving England out of the war.

England neutralized Germany's blockade of British shipping by reducing vulnerable shipping and increasing food production at home. In order to reduce shipping, the importation of five to six million tons of animal feed per year was reduced to almost nothing.¹¹ The space that was once taken up by food for farm animals was now replaced with food that could be directly eaten by humans.¹² The economical advantage to this policy was that it took several tons of animal feed to produce just one ton of meat or eggs, which would have been wasteful of valuable shipping space.¹³ The change accurately reflects the government's policy that designated ship-space for food that could feed and "sustain" the most amounts of people.¹⁴ With the lack of imported animal

⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁵ Ministry of Food. *How Britain was Fed in Wartime: Food Control, 1939-1945*, 17.

⁶ Olson, *The Economics of Wartime Shortages*, 128.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁹ Ministry of Food. *How Britain was Fed in Wartime*, 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Olson, *The Economics of Wartime Shortages*, 120.

feed, pig and poultry populations in Britain were greatly reduced. The English farmer had no feed to give to the pigs and poultry, and, in 1943, the number of pigs was reduced from 4.4 million to 1.8 million, and poultry numbers were curbed as well.¹⁵ In addition, the British Government had to convince eager exporters, such as the U.S. and Canada that “minor foodstuffs” (such as tapioca and coffee) were inefficient and non-essential and should no longer be exported.¹⁶ British import shipping dropped from 22.5 million tons of food to twelve million tons during the war years.¹⁷

In addition to the reduced shipping and importing of animal feed, the British exporters, in order to maximize the amount of shippable food, adopted new techniques and inventions to save shipping space. Powdered milk replaced liquid milk, which was advantageous because it did not require refrigerated ships, which were scarce at the time.¹⁸ “Telescoping”, the folding and compressing of meat, and de-boning were practiced.¹⁹ “Telescoping” of meat caused British housewives some confusion as the meat came to England distorted out of its usual form. Upon arrival to England, the meat looked so deformed that women did not know what cut they were actually getting and had to relearn the cuts of meat after the war.²⁰ Britain’s Department of Scientific and Industrial Research invented spray-dried eggs, thus saving ninety-five percent of the space that eggs-in-carton would have taken.²¹ British shipping had been successfully modified to avoid crippling losses to the German navy. It was the job of the agricultural industry and England’s farmers to produce more food to make up for the importation losses.

The farmers and the agricultural industry answered the call to duty. Caloric output by British agriculture increased by more than 10 billion from pre-war levels.²² Early in the war, a Scientific Food Committee for the government’s food policy created the

¹⁵ Ministry of Food, *How Britain was Fed in Wartime*, 9.

¹⁶ Hammand, *Food and Agriculture in Britain*, 29.

¹⁷ Olson, *The Economics of Wartime Shortages*, 128.

¹⁸ Ministry of Food, *How Britain was Fed in Wartime*, 12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Driver, *The British at Table*, 22.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

²² Olson, *The Economics of Wartime Shortages*, 125.

“basal diet,” which stressed the consumption of whole-meal breads, fats, milk, potatoes, and other vegetables for the English people.²³ The most important step in providing food for this diet was the plowing of permanent grasses into acreages designated for cereals and potatoes.²⁴ These foods were for direct human consumption, not the feeding of livestock. Cereals, potatoes, and other vegetables provided what the English Government considered “vital nutrients” and were grown in large numbers.²⁵ Every year of the war, save 1945, the Government’s goal for wheat acreage was met.²⁶ Two million additional acres were plowed in 1939, designated for the planting of wheat, potatoes, oats, barley, beans, peas, rye, and mixed corn.²⁷ During the war years, production was increased ninety percent in wheat, eighty-seven percent in potatoes, and forty-five percent in vegetables compared with the pre-war year.²⁸

The agricultural industry was successful in vastly increasing their food production. This success was partly due to the creation of Agricultural Executive Committees. These committees had the power to determine how any agricultural land was to be used and could dispossess farmers who were not keeping up with output expectations. The committees controlled farming through the rationing of feed, fertilizers, and farm machinery.²⁹ In addition, the government set high prices for agricultural products and wages for the agricultural industry in order to keep labor on the farms and the farmers making profits.³⁰ The agricultural sector of Britain had succeeded in the all-important job of producing the food for the country. It was the Ministry of Food that controlled and distributed that food.

The Minister of Food, Lord Woolton, whose head was appropriately potato-shaped, created a slogan for his department:

²³ Hammand, *Food and Agriculture in Britain*, 34.

²⁴ Olson, *The Economics of Wartime Shortages*, 121.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

²⁷ Hammand, *Food and Agriculture in Britain*, 32.

²⁸ Ministry of Food, *How Britain was Fed in Wartime*, 5.

²⁹ Hammand, *Food and Agriculture in Britain*, 31.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

“Feed the People!”³¹ The Ministry of Food effectively dealt with the food problems in England through price control and regulations, rationing, and the creation of communal food centers. The Ministry’s job was to control the prices of essential foods all along the different stages of distribution.³² The object of this price control was to, “assure all classes a fair share of food supplies and prevent inflation.”³³ The goal was met, and after three years of war, almost all the important foods had fixed prices, which allowed the average-earning Englishman a chance to buy them.³⁴ Price controls were maintained by subsidies given by the government. The subsidies took form in either the Ministry of Food absorbing trading losses or direct payments to retailers, wholesalers, producers, or shippers.³⁵ Ninety-seven percent of the foods in the Food Index received some amount of subsidy from the government.³⁶ An example was the government’s direct subsidy to local authorities, which enabled them to provide cheap milk for expectant mothers and children at school.³⁷

In order to prevent the wealthy from buying all available goods, the Ministry of Food decided to ration the important and limited supplies of foods. In September 1939, a national registration was given through the mail to all of Great Britain and was used as the basis for rationing.³⁸ The first rationing program did not actually start until January 8, 1940.³⁹ The main foods initially rationed were butter, sugar, bacon, and ham.⁴⁰ The rationing of these foods can be traced to the cutting off of shipping from Denmark after Germany overran it in 1940. Prior to 1939, Denmark had been a major exporter of butter and bacon.⁴¹

³¹ Mosley, *Backs to the Wall: The Heroic story of the People of London During World War II*, 71; Christina Hardymont, *Slice of Life: The British way of Eating since 1945* (London: BBC Books, 1995), 19.

³² Ministry of Food, *How Britain was Fed in Wartime*, 25.

³³ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁴ Jules Backman, *Rationing and Price Control in Great Britain* (Washington, DC: The Bookings Institution, 1943), 14-15.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Hammand, *Food and Agriculture in Britain*, 143.

³⁸ Backman, *Rationing and Price Control in Great Britain*, 24.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Driver, *The British at Table*, 22.

⁴¹ Hammand, *Food and Agriculture in Britain*, 20.

Eventually, the major foods rationed expanded to include meat, cheese, fats, and preserves.⁴² Important foods, in terms of calories and nutrition, that escaped rationing’s grasp were bread, oatmeal, potatoes, fresh vegetables, fruit (except oranges), and fish.⁴³ Of the rationed foods, an Englishman could purchase 1 pound of fresh meat (including the bone), four ounces of bacon, eight ounces of sugar, three ounces of cheese, eight ounces of fat, and three ounces of sweets or chocolates per week. This was a small percentage of the pre-war levels consumed by the English. Prior to the war’s beginning, the average person ate one and three-fourths pounds of meat a week, and five and one-half ounces of bacon and ham, one pound of sugar, twelve ounces of cheese, ten and one-half ounces of fats, and six and one-half ounces of sweets and chocolates.⁴⁴ Clearly the consumption of rationed foods had been reduced.

Rationing was strictly regulated. A consumer registered with a single retailer, who then applied for a permit to obtain rationed foods.⁴⁵ Retailers received a guaranteed supply of food based on the number of his customers registered at the date of the last registration.⁴⁶ Customers were tied to one retailer and bought the rations each week from the shop with which they were registered. The retailer canceled a customer’s coupons from his or her ration book after a rationed food was purchased.⁴⁷ Rationed foods were counted in their original forms and as ingredients in other foods. In addition, special permits for rationing were given to institutions with large amounts of people such as hospitals, schools, prisons, hotels, and restaurants.⁴⁸ Extra rations were given to those citizens employed in hard labor. Merchant seamen, underground miners, agricultural laborers, foresters, and other physically drained workers, whom were essential to the country’s survival, received extra food because of their high level of exertion.⁴⁹

⁴² Ministry of Food, *How Britain was Fed in Wartime*, 33.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁴ Driver, *The British at Table*, 27.

⁴⁵ Hammand, *Food and Agriculture in Great Britain*, 21.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Backman, *Rationing and Price Control in Great Britain*, 31.

Lastly, there was a less-important aspect of rationing called “points rationing” that was implemented on December 1, 1941.⁵⁰ Points rationing was not essential to British survival. It was adopted from the Germans (of course, this was not told to the British public) and gave consumers a choice in where to spend their “points” for such foods that were considered luxuries at the time or too scarce for the government to guarantee a ration.⁵¹ These foods included canned meats, peas and beans, certain kinds of fruit, tapioca, and biscuits.⁵² Rationing worked well in providing limited amounts of foods not in abundance.

Another aspect of the wartime food program was its creation of large food centers. When an Englishman could not eat at home or at a local restaurant, he could go to a communal feeding center for nourishment. Communal feeding centers were set up both for the poor, who could not afford private restaurant prices⁵³ and for workers who, because of their jobs, could not eat at home.⁵⁴ These large food centers were called “communal feeding centers” until Winston Churchill ordered Lord Woolton to change them to “British Restaurants” because the former sounded too communist.⁵⁵ In 1943, British Restaurants reached their peak, with 2,160 in operation serving around 600,000 meals a day.⁵⁶ The government for any factory employing more than 250 people also set up industrial canteens.⁵⁷ By 1941, seventy-nine million meals were served in industrial canteens.⁵⁸ Agricultural workers who worked too deep within a rural area and did not have a canteen or British Restaurant available to them, received meat pies, snacks, and sandwiches delivered by volunteer organizations.⁵⁹

The government limited the number of these communal feeding establishments to ensure that they did not deplete

⁵⁰ Hammand, *Food and Agriculture in Great Britain*, 112.

⁵¹ Driver, *The British at Table*, 21.

⁵² Ministry of Food, *How Britain was Fed in Wartime*, 42.

⁵³ Hammand, *Food and Agriculture in Britain*, 172.

⁵⁴ Ministry of Food, *How Britain was Fed in Wartime*, 44.

⁵⁵ Driver, *The British at Table*, 3.

⁵⁶ Hammand, *Food and Agriculture in Britain*, 175.

⁵⁷ Hardymont, *Slice of Life: The British way of Eating since 1945*, 12.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁹ Ministry of Food, *How Britain was Fed in Wartime*, 45.

“domestic rations.”⁶⁰ The benefit of these communal feeding centers was clearly stated in *How Britain was Fed in Wartime*: “Communal feeding in all its forms was a way of avoiding complicated systems of different rationing for thousands of different workers.”⁶¹ Additionally, it saved time and money by allowing the workers to eat at more convenient locations.

Britain, as a whole, was more healthily fed in the 1940s than it had been in previous years. However, as Christopher Driver points out, “nutritional well-being and psychological perception of eating better or worse are often two entirely different things.”⁶² The government had been able to fulfill the people’s physical needs. This accomplishment is not to be taken lightly. Had the English government not been prepared to handle the assortment of food-related problems, their war effort might have been stalled due to hunger and starvation for English people at home and abroad. People dying or suffering from lack of food may have rioted or been less productive. Had a soldier’s child been ill due to lack of food, who knows how that might have affected the soldier’s ability to fight? It certainly would have added to the stresses of an already tension-filled war. The changes in food importation and food production policies along with the organization of the rationing machine were essential in stabilizing the English nation at war.

Despite this tremendous achievement, most English people agreed that during the war, they were eating worse. The civilian population thought food problems were one of the most important consequences of the war along with evacuations, air raids, and the disruption of family life.⁶³ The Ministry of Information created a report stating the factors of war life that produced low morale. Food was fourth on the list.⁶⁴ Home Intelligence reported low public morale in 1940 and it is clear that all of the war’s consequences, including the food situation, were causes for the

⁶⁰ Hammand, *Food and Agriculture in Britain*, 173.

⁶¹ Ministry of Food, *How Britain was Fed in Wartime*, 47.

⁶² Driver, *The British at Table*, 17.

⁶³ Ina Zweiniger-Bargieowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 60.

⁶⁴ Ian McLaine, *Ministry of Morale: Home Front Morale and the Ministry of Information in World War II* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979), 113.

low morale.⁶⁵ The food available to the public failed miserably in satisfying the Englishman's appetite. The government's pathetic attempts at trying to push the available diet reveal its failure to provide food that the people actually liked. Cheese and other highly valued food items were scarce during the war. In addition, homefront propaganda stressed suffering and sacrifice to the British public.⁶⁶ And, in terms of the taste and flavor of their food, suffer and sacrifice they did. The Ministry of Food, itself, admitted the existence of a shortage of a large number of all the more appetizing and popular foods.⁶⁷ Palate stimulants such as blue cheese, anchovies, and other spices were no longer found.⁶⁸ Lord Woolton would try, and fail, to convince the public that whale meat and snoek (an obscure South African Fish) were nutritious and tasty.⁶⁹

The government tried to promote certain recipes with ingredients that were in abundance. Their recipe for a Spanish omelet used dried eggs instead of fresh ones. The "Savory Scones" replaced flour with oatmeal.⁷⁰ These were two of the more respectable recipes the government pushed. "Victory Dishes" look now like a desperate attempt to make meals out of potatoes, dried eggs, and salt cod sound appetizing.⁷¹ "Victory Pudding" was a bland egg-less sponge made with carrot, potatoes, and breadcrumbs.⁷² "Woolton Pie" looked like a steak and kidney pie but had neither the steak nor the kidney.⁷³ These dishes simply could not replace the tastier meals of the past.

The British people's reaction to their diet was one of grudging acceptance and their morale suffered because of the new diet and other food-related problems. Gallup polls of the time show that food and general shortages were a major problem on a national and personal level in the 1940s for the English people.⁷⁴ Fifty

⁶⁵ Ibid., 62.

⁶⁶ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain*, 60.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 37.

⁶⁸ Driver, *The British at Table*, 17.

⁶⁹ Alan F. Wilt, *Food for War: Agriculture and Rearmament in Britain before the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 252.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 227.

⁷¹ Hammond, *Food and Agriculture in Britain*, 183.

⁷² Hardyment, *Slice of Life*, 11.

⁷³ Wilt, *Food for War*, 228.

⁷⁴ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain*, 63.

percent of men and thirty-one percent of women polled in 1943 believed that there was not even enough food to keep fit.⁷⁵ The lack of food was matched, unfortunately for the Englishman, by a lack of flavor in the "basal diet."⁷⁶ Not only did quantities of food decrease, but also the quality of rare and precious foods such as chocolates, biscuits, and sweets suffered.⁷⁷ There are accounts of soup having the consistency of paste and containing beige beans and beige potatoes.⁷⁸ Much anticipated Christmas dinners no longer had the succulent courses of turkey, chicken, goose, or even rabbit. Mutton took their place.⁷⁹

The British Restaurants were criticized as well. A Sir William Darling stated that the communal feeding centers "are brutal in their cooking, brutal in their presentation of food."⁸⁰ A meal from one of the British Restaurants was described as follows: "One potato, one piece of carrot, and a 2''x 3'' rectangle of boiled beef, followed by a small piece of boiled pudding, spoilt with evil-tasting sauce."⁸¹ Queues for food were another source of aggravation for the people. "Queuing" was so volatile that Home Intelligence sensed "growing anger" from them and considered the queues "hot-beds of anti-semitism."⁸² People began to believe that Jews, "always manage to get hold of more food than other people."⁸³

Along with queues, certain kinds of foods sparked controversy and discontent among the English population. Shellfish and game were never rationed because the government could not guarantee a rationed amount for all of the population. However, many private restaurants would buy them up and serve them at high prices that only the wealthy could afford.⁸⁴ Tea, a common British beverage, was so rare by 1943 that people thought of trading whiskey for it.⁸⁵

⁷⁵ Ibid., 76.

⁷⁶ Wilt, *Food for War*, 221.

⁷⁷ Ministry of Food, *How Britain was Fed in Wartime*, 2.

⁷⁸ Driver, *The British at Table*, 35.

⁷⁹ Mosley, *Backs to the Wall*, 350.

⁸⁰ Philip Ziegler, *London at War, 1939-1945* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 251.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain*, 77.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 78.

⁸⁵ Mosley, *Backs Against the Wall*, 336.

In addition, meat rations were so low that they could only last a person for three nights out of the week.⁸⁶ This in turn caused meat to become one of the most sensitive food issues. This was especially true for male manual workers who felt that their diet was inadequate due to the lack of meat. Meat was highly prized as a marker of status and male privilege in the English working class diet.⁸⁷ The large decrease of such an important food caused much unhappiness.⁸⁸

The rationing program also fell under fire. Consumers felt “tied down” to just one retailer they were registered with to receive rations.⁸⁹ There were examples of butchers and customers arguing over varieties and sizes of meat.⁹⁰ One working class woman complained that the rations were simply not “large enough” to please her.⁹¹ In January 1941, only forty-four percent of those polled thought that the existing rationing system worked fairly for everybody.⁹² The main problem people had with rationing was accurately summed up by a Ministry of Food memorandum, “Rationing is essentially inequitable; it provides the same quantity of an article for each person without any consideration of their needs or habits or of their capacity to change.”⁹³

Nothing revealed the public’s dissatisfaction with the food situation better than the extensive black market activity that occurred during the war.⁹⁴ The violators were mainly producers, distributors, and retailers of food. However, it was public demand for certain foods, primarily meat, eggs, poultry, and tea, that kept the market alive.⁹⁵ The worst areas of black market activity were docks, ports, and large industrial areas where there was heavy food traffic.⁹⁶ The black market was supplied through unauthorized production, counterfeit ration coupons, growers and producers of

⁸⁶ Driver, *The British at Table*, 16.

⁸⁷ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain*, 74.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹⁰ Mosley, *Backs to the Wall*, 311.

⁹¹ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain*, 72.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 70.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁹⁴ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain*, 151.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 160.

farm products, theft, and by adding water to increase the weight of rationed foods.⁹⁷ In one example of black market activity, one Italian restaurant hid steaks under a mound of spinach to try and fool the food inspectors.⁹⁸ The Ministry of Food issued 10,598 violations in one year between 1939 and 1940. The next year saw 29,329 and 33,811 during 1942.⁹⁹ It is obvious from both individual reactions and the existence of a black market, that there was a palpable frustration with the food problem.

Mumblin and the black market were as far as the people would go with their dissatisfaction. Indeed, that is a tribute to them and the English government. Certainly, rationing had caused its fair share of headaches for the British people, but by 1942, rationing was accepted as a “necessary matter of course.”¹⁰⁰ There was never any danger of starvation,¹⁰¹ and the wartime diet went well beyond the bare essentials.¹⁰² The British public, despite grumbling and engaging in black market activity, saw the food program as a necessary sacrifice for the war effort.¹⁰³ The Agricultural Industry was successful in handling the reduction of imported foods by producing more homegrown food. The Ministry of Food had the complicated job of rationing and distributing the food, which it did well, despite some minor setbacks. The primacy given to meeting the people’s nutritional needs almost necessarily meant that taste would be sacrificed. Fortunately for Britain’s war effort, the British people grudgingly accepted their bland and monotonous wartime diet. By 1942, food rationing was perceived as one of the great achievements of the war.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁷ Backman, *Rationing and Price Control in Great Britain*, 61-62.

⁹⁸ Ziegler, *London at War*, 250.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁰⁰ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain*, 72.

¹⁰¹ Mosley, *Backs to the Wall*, 314.

¹⁰² Driver, *The British at Table*, 16.

¹⁰³ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain*, 60.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.