



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918
Rationing in Practice: Queuing for Food (October 1917)

The system of rationing was far from adequate for the basic needs of the German population. The impact of the blockade and the resulting critical shortages in basic areas transformed consumption patterns among Germans. The nutrient quality of food declined, to say nothing of its palatability. This document illustrates the everyday effects of a command economy.

I take the liberty of drawing your attention to the inadequate organization during the sale of white cabbage at the granary, which upset the public a great deal.

I was an eye-witness and am describing what I experienced myself. The sale had been advertised to begin at 8 A.M. I was there on time, and I joined a crowd of people that numbered in the hundreds and stood probably ten abreast in front of the granary. After an hour and a half of waiting I had been pushed as far as the entrance. (It was a blessing that it was not pouring rain, as it has in the last few days.) From the entrance I could see that the entire crowd had to push towards a single counter. This spectacle proceeded with a great deal of crowding and complaining. I gave up the fight and pulled back. Most of the crowd consisted of women who are dependent on their own labor to make a living and who, thanks to this inadequate organization, lost at least three hours of their valuable time. I am taking the liberty now of posing the following questions:

1. Why does the sale of white cabbage to the entire city have to take place in only one place?
2. Why is there only a single counter and a single stack of white cabbage for distribution in the whole spacious granary, instead of several of both, so the public could distribute itself?
3. How is it possible that after three years of experience, the same conditions prevail that used to mark the distribution of potatoes?

I pose my questions in the interest of that part of the public whose valuable working hours are shortened by endless but avoidable waiting, and who are justifiably enraged over such treatment. I will refrain from complaining about the impolite personal remarks of the [market] inspector, because such a complaint would have no result, after the same official was permitted to insult the wife of City Councilor Glockner last year without suffering any reprimand.

Source: M. Nebel an Hans Thoma [M. Nebel to Hans Thoma], Freiburg, October 15, 1917.
Stadtarchiv Freiburg, C3/779-6.

Translation: Jeffrey Verhey and Roger Chickering