German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918
Hunger: Ernst Gläser, *Born in 1902* (1928)

Novelist, editor, and journalist Ernst Gläser (1902-1963) spoke for a troubled generation when he wrote *Born in 1902*. The novel became an international bestseller soon after it was published in 1928. It records the experiences of a boy too young to have fought in the First World War, but old enough to have experienced the social dislocation and material deprivation resulting from it. The novel also shows how German youth rejected the "failed" ways and values of the older generation and yearned for new sources of meaning and direction. The book was burned by the Nazis in 1933 for its pacifist "tendencies" and explicit sexuality – not to mention its author's leftist sympathies. (Ironically, Gläser would later become a staunch conservative and would be "rehabilitated" by the Nazis and employed by them as an editor.) The following excerpt describes the suffering caused by the First World War, specifically the food shortages that resulted from it. Hunger was an overwhelming fact of life on the home front, and versatile root vegetables, such as the turnip, were the staple of most meals.

"This is going to be a hard winter," sighed my mother on one of those days, as Kathinka put the meal on the table. The meal consisted of a couple of slices of fat-free sausage, daintily cut-up turnips, which were held together by a thin sauce, and three potatoes per person. The bread could well have been used to make models of small men. It was like clay.

We sat waiting, almost praying, in front of this meal. Perhaps, we thought, it would change miraculously to match our desires. While I was opening my napkin apathetically and lethargically – for we had been eating the same thing almost daily for months – my mother put her hand on the back of my neck, ran her hand almost fearfully through my hair and said softly and indistinctly: "I can't do anything about it . . . tomorrow perhaps I can get a couple of eggs and some meat . . . don't be so sad . . . perhaps I can also get some white flour. . ." She wept.

"But mother," I lied, "this tastes very good, although of course the other things would be even better." I picked up my spoon and dug enthusiastically into the pale turnips.

Then Kathinka, who has been allowed to eat at our table since the beginning of the war, stopped me, gave me a reproaching look, and folded her hands.

We sat stiffly in the chairs, and as a company of new recruits marched through the street to the firing ranges, singing songs as ordered, I prayed loudly and defiantly, "Dear Lord Jesus, be our guest and bless what you have given us."

From the bread plate the slogan of the year glowed in red letters: "Better war-bread than no bread."

Then we bowed our heads quietly over the meal.

Kathinka gave me her potatoes; my mother gave me two slices of sausage. Afterwards I had to lie down so the meal would settle.

Kathinka, however, was asked to go next Sunday to her parents, who live on a farm in Upper Franconia, and to get some butter. My mother gave her one of her prettiest blouses and, for her old father who liked to read books, three volumes of Felix Dahn's "The Struggle for Rome."

"Thank you," said Kathinka and wiped her hands with joy on her apron, the pocket of which was embroidered with a small black, red and white flag. "Ha, I'll bring butter rolls back – they won't catch me. . .!" She meant the military police, who for the last month have been posted at the train stations, checking every arriving passenger for forbidden foodstuffs. We trusted Kathinka, because we knew where she hid the butter rolls. In her woolen bloomers.

The shamelessness of the war had not yet reached the point where the police were allowed to search there.

The winter remained hard until the end. The war began to leap from the fronts and press onto civilians. Hunger destroyed unity; within families, children stole rations from one another. August's mother went to church twice a day. She prayed and lost weight. The food that she was allotted she distributed to August and his siblings, and she kept only a minimum for herself. Soon the women who stood in the gray lines in front of the stores were talking more about their children's hunger than about their husband's deaths. The war switched the sensations that it offered.

A new front emerged. It was held by women. Against the "Entente" of military police and male civilian inspectors who could not be spared for military service. Every pound of butter that was surreptitiously obtained, every sack of potatoes that was successfully concealed at night was celebrated in families with the same enthusiasm as the victories of the armies had been celebrated two years earlier.

Soon many fathers, who were stationed in regions where food was grown and who had the power to requisition from the enemy population, were sending packages of food to their families via comrades who were on furlough. Administrators of food depots, city officials who distributed the ration cards for bread, and farmers who owned strong cattle and good land became authority-figures, whom one approached as one used to approach high-ranking and rich relatives. Whenever we entered the kitchen of a farmhouse, where fresh milk stood in large containers or a ham swung under the chimney-hood, we were overcome by the same timidity that befell August and his working-class comrades when they used to see a middle-class salon or a piano years ago.

Actually we enjoyed this change, for it awakened our sense of adventure. It was wonderful and dangerous to steal away from farmhouses with forbidden eggs, to throw oneself into the grass when a policeman turned up, and to count the minutes by one's heartbeat. It was wonderful and grand to dupe these policemen and to be celebrated as a hero by one's mother after a lucky triumph.

Source: Ernst Gläser, *Jahrgang 1902* [*Born in 1902*] (1928). Berlin, 1931, pp. 290-93.

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