

# Food and Nutrition (Belgium)

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**The First World War had a severe impact on the food supply in occupied Belgium. The prospect of famine turned food into an urgent political problem and the subject of far-reaching social-political arrangements such as a massive domestic and foreign relief operation. Access to food was impacted to varying degrees for different social groups. The inequalities linked with the deprivations of occupation gave birth to sharp social tensions which in turn provoked acrid protests.**

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## Introduction

At the outbreak of the First World War, Belgium was the most densely populated country on earth. Heavily industrialized and urbanized, pre-war Belgium depended to a large extent on food imports. Wheat, without any doubt the most important foodstuff for Belgium's population, was 80 percent imported. This dependency on international trade made the food supply for most Belgians extremely vulnerable to external shocks. The experience of the First World War and over fifty months of occupation made this vulnerability very clear.<sup>[1]</sup> The German invasion of 4 August 1914 and occupation of 95 percent of Belgium's territories in the following three months meant that all foods imports were cut-off by the British Navy as part of the Allies' economic warfare. Belgium was thus forced to self-sufficiently feed its population.

Even during peacetime, autarchic food supply was impossible in Belgium. The war made things

worse. The German army claimed foodstuffs while distribution was disrupted during the invasion. Under German occupation, domestic food production faced structural problems: the acreage of arable land was considerably reduced due to the presence of the front zone in Western Flanders and exhausted due to a lack of fertilizers. The absence of a large number of workers (refugees, soldiers and workers had been deported to Germany) further compromised yields.

German intervention made self-sufficiency all the more illusory. Shortages became even more acute because of inadequate stocking and distribution systems imposed by the occupier. The national food market was disrupted by this deficient policy and fragmented by traffic limitations and the creation of a frontier between the *Etappengebiet* (the area behind the front lines ruled by the army in the western third of the country) and the *General Gouvernement* (the rest of the country under a civil administration in Brussels). Finally, the occupier directly siphoned off part of Belgian agricultural and fertiliser production for the German market as had been done with the food stocks in the Antwerp harbour during the invasion.

Food shortages and concomitant price increases resulting from the blockade and insufficient domestic production were an immediate danger to the food supply of the vast majority of the Belgian population. It was clear that Belgium, once cut off from international supplies, would never be able to feed itself and, even in the short run, would face scarcity and hunger (the fear of starvation had already started to circulate in autumn 1914). Since the occupation was the central war experience for most Belgians, this article addresses the problem of endangered entitlements to food in occupied Belgium. How did people manage to survive under these conditions? What kind of social-political arrangements were deployed in order to preserve these entitlements? How did different social groups perceive the adjustment of entitlements? What social tensions do these perceptions reveal? To what extent did people protest to defend their entitlements to food?

## Food and Politics

The German invasion immediately put an end to the principle of free trade that had been dominant in the Belgian political economy for decades. Confronted with an urgent crisis situation, the authorities resorted to interventionist supply measures and curbed the operation of the market at the very beginning of the invasion.<sup>[2]</sup> The emergency law of 4 August 1914 prohibited the export of food and made it possible to impose maximum prices and organise enforced sales. On the basis of this act, as early as August 1914 [Albert I, King of the Belgians \(1875-1934\)](#) imposed maximum prices for six basic products. Local authorities regulated others in the first few months of the war by establishing maximum prices, quality stipulations or requisitions. However, the Germans soon largely took on the regulation of food provision (for example by determining maximum prices).

Once the country was almost completely conquered in autumn 1914, under international law the nutrition of the Belgian population became the responsibility of the German occupier. However, the Germans refused to supply Belgium as long as the Allies maintained their blockade. In October

1914 this deadlock was resolved with an agreement permitting the reestablishment of food imports via the neutral Netherlands. Britain allowed these imports as long they arrived at their destination and were not confiscated by the Germans. This agreement was the result of private initiative in occupied Brussels. In the autumn of 1914 a group of financiers and industrialists founded the National Committee for Aid and Food (*Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation*), originally a Brussels-based concentration of charities that quickly developed into an organisation with nationwide ambitions. The National Committee led by [Emile Francqui \(1863-1935\)](#) searched for international aid to resume food imports. [Herbert Hoover \(1874-1964\)](#), a businessman and future United States president mobilized funding through his organisation the [Commission for Relief in Belgium](#) (CRB), bought consumables and sent them to occupied Belgium. The neutral character of the organisation was a guarantee against German confiscation.

After the entry of the United States into the war in April 1917, the remaining neutral powers (especially the Netherlands and Spain) officially ensured the continuity of the CRB. The Germans tolerated the National Committee (which was not under their control) since it lessened the “burden” of feeding Belgium and expunged their culpability in case of a real hunger crisis.

Belgian elites were also prepared to intervene in the supply of food to the country's population. They feared that a food crisis would lead to disruption of the public and, therefore, social order. Acting out of self-interest, the elites defined their role in the area of food provision in paternalist terms. The composition of the sections of the National Committee indicates that local dignitaries considered that responsibility theirs since the state authority had largely fallen away. In order to broaden its composition and thus enlarge its legitimacy the National Committee was even willing to bring local socialist protagonists into the fold.

The National Committee did not only import food in cooperation with the CRB, it also organised a nationwide system of food distribution. The National Committee managed to organise a more or less equitable distribution of the imported consumables through the mediation of unemployment funds, public assistance and hospitals. The widely encompassing nature of the work of the National Committee and related organisations (by the end of the war for example as much as forty per cent of the Belgian population used soup kitchens) makes it an early experiment in the welfare state. The categories of people entitled to make use of the private-public charity system were ever enlarged over the course of the occupation. By 1917, for the very first time in history, the entire Belgian population had, in principle, access to some form of assistance. With its presence at the very centre of daily life, the National Committee functioned as a kind of semi-official shadow government in occupied Belgium. By guaranteeing a more or less equitable distribution of food, it contributed to maintaining at least a minimal sense of confidence among the Belgian population in contrast to Russia and Germany where the food issue eroded popular support for the war and the legitimacy of authorities.

While the relief effort staved off a dire food crisis, it proved to be insufficient to secure adequate food for the entire Belgian population in the long run. The amount of food available was simply too

low: food imports never reached pre-war levels and domestic production declined during the occupation. The CRB's import programmes satisfied less than half of the actual needs. Scarcity caused food prices to rise continuously from the winter of 1916-1917 onwards. In the Brussels region in 1917 and 1918, official food prices were respectively four to six times as high as in 1914.

By the end of 1916 the base of the diet of most Belgians consisted of bread and potatoes. Consumption of dairy products, fat and meat was largely reduced. For the vast majority of the population, the black market with its even higher prices was no alternative: it was the privilege of the wealthy classes and the occupiers. Most people had to spend an ever growing part of their income on food since wages were not adjusted for inflation. Mass unemployment, especially among industrial workers, caused the purchasing power of the working classes to drop by an estimated 70 percent between 1914 and 1918. In the end, the difference between the employed and the unemployed became almost negligible. By September 1917, for example, the caloric intake of employed and unemployed workers in Brussels was respectively reduced to only 1,500 and 1,387 calories a day. Peter Scholliers and Frank Daelemans consider the situation in 1917 and 1918 unequivocally as a "famine," "a small-scale replica of the great crisis of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century."<sup>[3]</sup> Even if mass starvation had been avoided, the deprivations of war had a clear demographic impact. Marriages were postponed, birth rates dropped and starting from the winter of 1916-1917 mortality rates rose quickly (with the partial exception infant mortality which declined thanks to special aid programs aimed at newborns). A definitive study on mortality in occupied Belgium is still lacking. The available material, however, suggests that national mortality rates among people above five years of age rose thirty and seventy points in 1917 and 1918 respectively as compared to the 1910 index.

It is no surprise that Belgians combined food aid and the remainder of their (wage) incomes with more informal (survival) strategies in order to make ends meet. Kitchen gardens proved to be an important source of supplementary food in rural areas. In the cities, the creation of new allotment gardens was stimulated by local authorities. Begging was another important strategy to supplement meager diets. Early on during the occupation the impending famine drove groups of beggars (including many women) from the cities to the farms in the countryside in hope of some extra food. As was the case in other belligerent countries, consumables were stolen on a massive scale. As the food distribution capacity of the National Committee eroded during the second half of the occupation, these kinds of informal survival strategies became crucial in 1917 and 1918.

## **Social Tensions**

As in other European countries, social contrasts in Belgium tended to intensify as a result of the material deprivations of war. Some groups were more severely hit than others. People who depended on wage-earning for their living were greatly impacted by the food scarcity. Their purchasing power eroded due to rising prices and mass unemployment. For the working class the German occupation meant a brutal end to decades of rising living standards and diversifying food consumption. In the winter of 1916-1917 the diet of the average worker was back at the level of half a century earlier. White-collar workers, small retailers and other fractions of the middle classes also faced a more gradual, but nonetheless very real erosion of their living standards due to inflation. In the cities, only a small upper-class minority who could afford to supply themselves on the black market managed to escape almost completely from the deprivations of war.

The most relevant social contrast in relation to the food problem was between town and country, between industrial and agrarian areas. In general, people in the countryside were better off than people in urban and industrial regions. Farmers and landowners were able to consume food produced on their own land. Rural workers were better off than their urban counterparts as well. As part of traditional rural survival strategies they still had kitchen gardens that formed a welcome addition to the food purchased with family income. Moreover, the agrarian sector absorbed rural unemployment as it took advantage of rising food prices (although the extent of the enrichment of the farming population has yet to be documented).

As a result of the impoverishment of the vast majority of the population, more and more social groups appealed to public assistance or private charity in order to preserve a minimal entitlement to food. Soup kitchens, initially only accessible to the poor, opened their gates to everyone in the beginning of 1917. The entire Belgian population was from that moment onwards treated as potentially at risk of going hungry. The near universality of aid nevertheless did not efface social differences.<sup>[4]</sup> Special aid arrangements for the needy middle classes were created to avoid the public humiliation of queuing for the soup kitchen. Initiatives like *Bescheiden Hulp/Charité Discrète* (Discrete Help) discretely distributed aid packages among these “decent” destitute. *Restaurants économiques* (Economic restaurants) were established where the newly poor could have a sober meal at a low price.

The inequalities linked with the deprivations of the occupation gave birth to sharp social tensions focused on the production, distribution and consumption of food (and fuel). The Belgian population developed specific codes of conduct that regulated life in this regard. The notions of “justice” and “fairness” were central to this moral framework. Translated into Amartya Sen’s terminology, people were willing to limit their entitlements as long as they had the impression that the general “system of entitlements,” the framework upon which distributive networks rested, was just.<sup>[5]</sup> Due to the social resentment created by widespread poverty, a perception of the “justness of the system” was largely absent in occupied Belgium

All social groups tended to believe that they had been particularly hit and that others were relatively privileged.<sup>[6]</sup> The working-class claimed that it suffered most from scarcity and resented

the “rich” who did not have to undergo similar deprivations. The elites were preoccupied with the presumed “laziness” of the unemployed workers who spent their days in cinemas, pubs and gambling halls and who were deemed not to respect the obligation of sobriety in those difficult days. The middle class felt threatened by negative social mobility, blamed the workers for their “idleness” and the elites for escaping impoverishment.

In a similar way, the inhabitants of a particular city or region often complained that other cities or regions were better off. The idea, for example, that the capital received more and better food became a common *topos* in other large Belgian cities like Antwerp, Liège and Charleroi. Overall, city dwellers envied the rural regions for their better food situation. The predominately rural *Etappengebiet* in the west of the country, for instance, was seen by the inhabitants of the *General Gouvernement* in the east as a land of (relative) opulence. All agreed that Belgian refugees abroad were better off than the population in Belgium. The tendency to compare the (material) situation of different categories of people clearly reveals a preoccupation with justice and its mismanagement.

Growing class and regional tensions, however, were overshadowed by a complete intolerance of profiteers who took advantage of the difficult situation of the population to enrich themselves. Different social groups had different reasons to despise them. The elites regarded them as parvenus, the middle class as an illegitimate threat to their social position and the working class as a danger to their daily bread. The profiteers’ upward social mobility was considered illegitimate because it was achieved at the expense of the population’s well-being. They were imagined as obese, tasteless gluttons. Not surprisingly in a time of alimentary scarcity, it was particularly people involved in the production or distribution of food who were accused of being profiteers. Among the urban and industrial population, farmers had a particularly bad reputation. City dwellers tended to believe that they were making inordinate amounts of money thanks to rising food prices and that the rural population as a whole took advantage of the war. Rural mayors were blamed for protecting their profiteering subjects. In cities, anyone involved in food distribution (merchants, shopkeepers, butchers etc.) was constantly morally scrutinized by the public. Those suspected of transgressing the moral codes of conduct, by selling on the black market at high prices for example, endangered their position in informal social networks. It was not the employer who was held responsible for the rapidly declining standard of living, but rather the speculator who was thought to profit from the high prices.

While the hostility towards profiteers may have been very outspoken, Belgians first and foremost held the occupier responsible for the deprivations. The population was well aware of the German food and coal requisitions. It saw the occupier as a direct threat to its food entitlements which (partly) explains the intensity of anti-German feelings at the time. [Henri Pirenne \(1862-1935\)](#), the renowned historian and eye-witness to the war, explicitly stressed that anti-German sentiment was far greater in industrial and urban areas where the material impact of the occupation was felt more intensely.<sup>[7]</sup> The resistance press, which mainly reflected elite and middle-class views, heavily criticized the export of “Belgian” food to Germany and the appropriation of consumables by the

occupation army and administration. The focal point of this campaign was the idea that food grown in Belgium belonged to the Belgian population and certainly not to the occupier.<sup>[8]</sup>

## Protests

The First World War was an era of scarcity and even of dependency on food aid for many Belgians. This does not imply that everybody resignedly suffered the wartime material deprivations and social inequalities. Various groups repeatedly attempted to defend their entitlements to food.<sup>[9]</sup> By doing so, they tried to influence food politics by collective action. While elsewhere in Europe both food riots and strikes were used and often combined to defend entitlements to food, the particular setting (mass unemployment, the curbing of union activities, localisation of life etc.) of occupied Belgium limited the possibilities for striking. As a result, there was a more pronounced return to a seemingly archaic repertoire of action (hunger marches, food riots) than in other countries.

Hunger marches were a mainly urban phenomenon. These actions were mobilized by informal networks of neighbourhood sociability and called on local authorities – often in front of the town hall – to improve the food situation. Women were the main pacesetters and participants in the hunger marches. By consciously displaying notions of women as guardians and nurturers of children and the family, protesters put great pressure on local authorities as it was extremely difficult for administrators to argue against the legitimacy of the complaints of mothers who could not feed their offspring.

All three types of food riots identified by Charles Tilly (retaliation, price riot and blockade) occurred in occupied Belgium.<sup>[10]</sup> Price riots generally took place in markets where consumers personally imposed prices on the vendors to force them to respect the maximum prices. Price riots were a typical urban form of action, since inhabitants of towns were dependent on the market to a greater extent. There is evidence that price riots in occupied Belgium also occurred outside urban markets, on the farms of extortionate farmers, for example, who were forced to sell their stock at a price considered reasonable.

Food riots could also take on the form of retaliation against “profiteers.” This involved the use of informal social sanctions to punish or warn people who infringed moral standards. Traditional strategies of rural protest were formally used in the countryside: the destruction of harvests, stocks, fences and agricultural machines. In the towns and cities, profiteering traders or farmers were the target of retaliatory actions in the market. Other trade practices perceived as “unfair” could also ignite public fury. It was considered illegitimate to use scarce foodstuffs to prepare luxury products like cake and currant that had become completely unaffordable for most of the population. Blockade, a type of food riot in which the export of foodstuffs to other markets was prevented, was used in occupied Belgium. Undoubtedly the most controversial transfer was the export of foodstuffs to Germany. Food was channelled to Germany by way of the so-called

*Warenzentralen* (goods centres) which, from 1915, officially ensured food distribution within Belgium. The Belgian population regularly undertook blockade actions to stop exports. Moreover, people were ready to organize collective actions to defend local or regional entitlements to food against “foreign” contenders and to prevent food exports to other Belgian regions which were considered undeserving. Such blockades reveal the existence of a popular will to protect local or regional markets against “foreign” consumption.

Food protests in occupied Belgium were mainly but not exclusively modelled on an older repertoire of action. So-called “new” forms of action such as strikes were also used to defend claims for food. The strike was pre-eminently deployed in the mining sector. This finding can be ascribed to two factors: first, there was a strong sense of class-consciousness among miners and an explicit tradition of organised social action; second, employment rates in mining, in contrast with other industrial sectors during the occupation, largely stayed intact. Because of the fact that the mines - in contrast to other industries- were not closed down and the strategic importance of their industry for the occupier, miners were able to continue to use the strike as a means of exerting pressure and defending their claims to food.

These collective actions also indicate that one social group was able to put more weight on the scales of protest than others. As in other contexts of scarcity, it was not necessarily the worst affected groups that took the lead in collective actions. On the contrary, relatively privileged groups such as miners had comparatively far more means to collectively defend their claims to food. In negotiation proceedings, their voice overpowered that of the numerous unemployed who were largely dependent on aid.

What was the impact of all of these methods of protest? Caution is needed when examining the direct results. Strikes were only effective for the limited groups that could use the strike as a weapon. The picture is even more mixed in the case of food riots. Sometimes the punishment of extortionists really did have a (short-lived) positive effect on prices. In other cases, imposing maximum prices actually stimulated the black market or led to boycott actions by the producers. However, if food provision had been completely left to the market, large sections of the population would have been fully denied access to food with even more far-reaching consequences.

## **Conclusion**



The outbreak of the First World War posed a direct threat to access to food for the vast majority of the Belgian population which was heavily dependent on food imports. An international relief operation on a scale previously unknown largely averted the risk of mass starvation. However, hunger was a reality in occupied Belgium, generating a substantial increase in mortality rate from the winter of 1916-17 onwards. Social groups were affected to varying degrees by food shortages. The inequalities linked with the deprivations of the occupation gave birth to sharp social tensions which in turn provoked active protests. However manifest the social tensions caused by the food issue might have been, however vigorous the protest methods, Belgium's interventionist policy allowed the legitimacy of the overall system of entitlements to remain relatively intact throughout the war.

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## Notes

1. ↑ For the impact of the scarcity on the living standards and health of the Belgian population see: Scholliers, Peter / Daelemans, Frank: Standards of living and standards of health in wartime Belgium. In: Wall, Richard / Winter, Jay (eds.): *The Upheaval of War. Family, Work and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918*, Cambridge 1988, pp. 139-157.
2. ↑ For food politics in occupied Belgium see: Scholliers, Peter: The policy of survival: food, the state and social relations in Belgium, 1914-1921, in: Burnett, John / Oddy, Derek (eds.): *The Origins and Development of Food Policies in Europe*, London/ New York 1994, pp. 39-53. Nath, Giselle: *Brood willen we hebben! Honger, sociale politiek en protest tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog [We want bread! Hunger, social policies and protest during the First World War]*, Antwerp 2013.
3. ↑ Scholliers / Daelemans, *Standards of living* 1988, p. 143.
4. ↑ Scholliers, Peter: *La faim à Bruxelles en 14-18. Soupe populaire et restaurants économiques*, in: Jaumain, Serge / Piette, Valérie (eds.): *Bruxelles en 14-18. La guerre au quotidien*, *Les cahiers de la Fonderie*, 32 (2005), pp. 34-40.
5. ↑ Nussbaum, Martha / Sen, Amartya (eds.): *The Quality of Life*. Oxford 1993.
6. ↑ De Schaepdrijver, Sophie: *De Grote Oorlog. Het koninkrijk België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog [The Great War. The Kingdom of Belgium during the First World War]*, Amsterdam/Antwerp 1997, pp. 235-237.
7. ↑ Pirenne, Henri: *La Belgique et la guerre mondiale*, Paris/New Haven 1928, pp. 119-120.
8. ↑ Vrints, Antoon: "All the butter in the country belongs to us Belgians." Well-being and lower class national identification in Belgium during the First World War, in: Beyen, Marnix / Van Ginderachter, Maarten (eds.): *National Identification from Below. Europe from the Late 18th Century to the End of the First World War*, Houndmills/Basingstoke 2012, pp. 230-249.

9. ↑ For an overview of social protest in occupied Belgium see: Vrints, Antoon: **Sociaal protest in een bezet land. Voedseloproer in België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog** [Social protest in an occupied country. Food riots in Belgium during the First World War], in: *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 124 (2011), pp. 30-47.
10. ↑ Tilly, Charles: *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*. Princeton 1975, p. 386.

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## Citation

Vrints, Antoon: *Food and Nutrition (Belgium)*, in: 1914-1918-online. *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10267 Last modified: 2014-10-05.

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