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Food and War in Twentieth Century Europe

Samuël Kruizinga

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Food and War in Twentieth Century Europe, edited by Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, Rachel Duffett and Alain Drouard, Farnham, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011, xvii, 276 pp. + illustrations, £65.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4094-1770-5

The subjects of food and war are intimately connected. For one, war deeply influences patterns of food production, distribution and consumption, both amongst soldiers and on the home front. The reverse, however, is also true: the maintenance of an adequate food supply is absolutely vital to both an army's capacity for waging war and the civilian population's ability to support it. Finally, disrupting an enemy's food supply is a time-honoured economic weapon: attacking your opponent's supply of food (and, in modern times, feeding stuffs and fertilizers) was a key component of warfare, especially during the two World Wars.

The ambitious stated goal of the essay collection under review – which, as I will show, it fails to achieve – is to show how 'food and war were related and intertwined' (xvi). It contains 18 articles, eight of which focus on the First World War, most of the others on the Second World War. The authors are experts in the history of nutrition, and their focus therefore lies squarely on wartime changes in diet in the context of technological, administrative and/or ideological developments.

Various chapters in the book show that during the First World War, the ideal composition of the human diet was subject of much debate. Interestingly, real scientific knowledge about nutrition was, even in the Second World War, still in its infancy. Most nutritional scientists had only a very limited notion of the importance of vitamins and could not accurately measure the caloric value of different foodstuffs. In combination with age-old consumer preferences, this led many to overestimate the nutritional benefit of fats, especially animal fats. Rachel Duffett's article on British army provisioning shows how this particular view influenced what British soldiers were served to eat in the trenches of the Western Front. The mainstay of soldiers' rations consisted of tinned 'bully beef' and biscuits, which contained – or so the army leadership was led to believe – more than adequate supplies of fats in an attractively small package, easily transported and stored. However, nobody seems to have considered the fact that both beef and biscuits were incredibly dry and that soldiers needed plenty of fresh water, which was often lacking, to wash it down. Many soldiers therefore took to drinking from muddy (and infected) water pools. Perhaps even worse, the fatty 'bully beef' caused endemic bouts of diarrhoea.

Interestingly, as the chapter by Svend Skafte Overgaard shows, the Danish scientist Mikkel Hindhede was one of the few who held more 'modern' notions of

nutrition. Although his ideas were considered ‘fringe science’, he cleverly used his connections in political parties and agro-business to further them, whilst denouncing his detractors as old-fashioned. This tactic saw him elevated, in 1916, to one of the neutral Danish governments’ top advisory positions as regards the country’s food policy, and put him in a unique position to implement his then-radical ideas. At the time, Denmark experienced the effects of both sets of belligerents’ attempts to starve their opponent of shipping space – and therefore the capacity to import fertilizers, feeding stuffs and food. Ships flying neutral flags were forced off the sea by German U-boats and the virtual Entente monopoly on bunker coal. As food shortages loomed, the Danish government attempted, through rationing, price and production controls, to rationalise consumption. Acting on Hindhede’s advice, the government used these powers to enforce a low protein, high carbohydrate diet, based primarily on grains. In order to free up grains (and potatoes) for human consumption, it ordered the slaughter of the majority of the country’s stock of pigs and cows. This controversial decision seems to have paid off: not only was Denmark spared the level of malnutrition that occurred in Germany (or neutral Holland), mortality seems to have actually declined during the last year of the war. One wonders, as Peter Lummel does in another excellent article, what would have happened had the German government followed the Danish model, instead of relying on dietary notions geared almost entirely towards animal fats, whilst neglecting other – and more readily available – sources of protein.

These articles represent the best this volume has to offer: they challenge historians to re-think basic conceptions about food during wartime. These articles show that, contrary to the belief held by many historians, British soldiers during the First World War were not better fed than civilians, and that starvation in Germany was not simply a consequence of the British blockade or inept government policies. They illustrate the wide geographical scope of the book. However, they also show that the articles in this collection are solely concerned with the impact of war on food, not that of food on war. Since the articles in this book are written by food historians, this should come as no surprise, but the fact that not one of the articles dealing with 1914–1918 mentions the effect food had on the conduct of warfare or even the outcome of the war, is a missed opportunity. Most contributions to this essay collection fail to bring fresh ideas to the table. Especially weak are contributions dealing with the impact of war on different areas of Austria-Hungary, whose main conclusions seem to be that people didn’t much care about growing hungry, and picked berries in forests to supplement official rations.

In short, the essay collection’s contributions are somewhat of a mixed bag, ranging from excellent to mediocre. Unfortunately, there are more of the latter than the former. Moreover, the book’s limited focus and authors’ unwillingness to consider the impact of food on the conduct of warfare will be off-putting to many historians. However, those specifically interested in the food situation both at the front and at home – especially amongst the British and German armies and the German and neutral Danish home front – will find several articles to their liking. Whether this warrants buying this pricey book, I leave to them.

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