

The *Tägliche Rundschau* on the Equalization of Burdens (February 15, 1947)

Abstract

The destruction and losses of World War II did not affect the German population equally. Millions of people who had been bombed out of their homes and refugees who had lost everything lived alongside individuals who had hardly suffered any material losses at all. (This was especially the case in rural areas.) For that reason, the equalization of burdens [*Lastenausgleich*] became a topic of great discussion soon after the war's end. The Berlin newspaper *Tägliche Rundschau* rejected any notion of achieving this through an actual confiscation and redistribution of household goods, clothing, etc. (Such ideas were especially prevalent within the SPD.) According to the *Tägliche Rundschau*, such a solution would be impossible to carry out in practical terms and even counterproductive, since its failure threatened to discredit the much more important task of socializing the economy.

Source

The Equalization of Burdens through Restitution in Kind? A Bone of Contention as a Diversionary Tactic of the Reactionary Contingent

The war has pushed the German population into deep distress. The misery of those immediately affected is deep and cries out for redress. But it is not only the German people who were thrown into calamity by Hitler's war of aggression. Nearly all of Europe was exposed to the same chaotic conditions. One must consider these matters within this larger framework – and only in this way – if one wants to arrive at a reasonable clarification of the question of how to at least partially achieve an equalization of burdens.

Recently, certain circles have shown great tenacity in their praise for a solution that seems seductive at first glance and doubtless has a great many supporters for that very reason. The proposal is for a compulsory levy on articles of daily use from the property of the less affected for the benefit of those most affected. It is especially organs of the SPD that are advocating such a solution; but bourgeois circles have also recommended such measures in no small number of cases. For example, the South German Council of *Länder* is involved with a bill to register household goods. Württemberg-Baden has worked out its own draft to that effect, and reports from Solingen state that compulsory measures will be taken in the near future if the voluntary contribution of furniture and household goods does not yield the hoped-for results.

Naturally such plans are received with great hope by those who expect help from them. They see their own misery every day, and observe that other persons in their immediate neighborhood have been left with a great deal or seemingly with everything they had before the war. The assumption that some individuals today are even better off than before finds not infrequent justification. Those cases can only be exceptions, but they still attract general attention and create a lot of bad blood. It is not only misery, but frequently also envy that clouds perspectives when these situations are judged. Therefore, it seems necessary to examine the matter with a sober eye for once.

The war has affected the German population very unevenly. While some have literally lost everything and were only able to save a few meager pieces of clothing on their body, others are still sitting in their undamaged apartments and have undiminished enjoyment of their wealth, which at times consists of a landed estate, one or more factories, and other valuable sources of income. We are dealing, first of all,

merely with the question of whether it is expedient or desirable to create help for those in need through levies, in kind, on household goods and other everyday necessities by way of law, as long as it remains impossible to help them through preferential supply with durables from new production.

The circle of people who lack the most necessary everyday items is very large. This group does not consist solely of resettlers and those completely bombed out. All told, this group makes up nearly a third of the German population. The others, however, are by no means in an enviable position.

Of course, no one will revolt against the moral demand that the poorest of the poor must be helped through donations in kind from the households of the better off. This has already happened on a large scale and continues to happen through the solidarity of the people, without those immediately involved saying much about it. However, what must be decisively rejected is the compulsory registration of the household goods of those seemingly or actually better off.

In the discussion of this issue, it has already been pointed out repeatedly why such compulsory measures are infeasible and harmful. Lest the decree, which would encounter strong resistance among those affected, remain just on paper, tough control and punitive measures would have to be passed. That would lead to an endless chain of denunciations, maneuvers to circumvent it, bribery of the controlling organs, and also to a deep disruption of social life, which would have an extremely deleterious effect on the entire population's work ethic. A considerable investment of personnel would be unavoidable. In all of this, however, the most important source of these sought-after everyday items – new production – would be impeded instead of promoted.

The bills on this question also pondered the question of how the intended levy on household goods to benefit the needy would be staggered. In the process, people proceeded, for example, from an estimate of wealth at pre-war purchasing prices. It is obvious that herein lies a source of countless quarrels. These quarrels will be all the more bitter and the feeling of unjust treatment all the more intense if the issue revolves around whether the threshold for the levy has or has not been crossed. For example, according to one draft known to us, a person subject to the levy would have to contribute 5% for household goods valued up to 5,000 Marks, but 10% for household goods valued at 5,000–10,000 Marks.

Incidentally, these sorts of rates suggest that the outcome of such a levy itself would be very disappointing, even to its most ardent supporters. For the great mass of the German population probably falls into the lowest category, and if it were to actually hand over 5% of its household goods, this would still be an entirely unsatisfactory amount of help for a mass of 25 million people, or even more, and the administration and distribution of this help would cause a lot more work than it is worth.

Finally, resettlers, those bombed out of their homes, and other suffering people must bear in mind that in the event of a compulsory levy, they would not receive items of good usability, but mostly items that are already as good as useless. Much of it would break during transport or be seriously damaged. It does not require a lot of imagination to picture all of this in detail, but evidently the legislators who hatch such plans possess only a very limited power of imagination and a limited knowledge of practical life – or else they have gotten it into their heads to throw this bone of contention to the German people in any case, in order to divert its attention from more important things.

That is not a bad plan. To an impoverished grandmother, the cooking pot she hopes to get from such a law – or is afraid to lose – is much more important than the question of whether some company chief is to remain in complete or partial possession of his authority over parts of German industry. By beginning the “socialization” process with vital everyday items for the working masses, the hope is to thoroughly spoil the masses’ taste for interventions in company business. The advocates of the “socialization of items of daily use” also know full well that a levy in kind on household goods faces insurmountable obstacles if it is to be implemented with some hope of practical results. They wish for precisely these

difficulties so they can say: “There you see what happens if one attempts even minor interferences in private property!”

The only sensible way out of the current misery is the continuation of friendly neighborly help on a voluntary basis and the quickest and largest possible efforts on behalf of new production. For the Soviet Occupation Zone, Marshal Sokolovsky’s order has shown that this new production will not be long in coming. Even if only the most urgent needs can be met at first – and here one must not limit oneself schematically to resettlers and the bombed-out – this path will lead more surely to the goal than demagogic laws with which the reaction hopes to further deepen the division of the workers.

Source: “Lastenausgleich durch Naturalausgabe? Ein Zankapfel als Ablenkungsmanöver der Reaktion”, *Tägliche Rundschau*, no. 39, February 15, 1947; reprinted in Udo Wengst, *Geschichte der Sozialpolitik in Deutschland*, Bd. 2/2: 1945–1949: *Die Zeit der Besatzungszonen. Sozialpolitik zwischen Kriegsende und der Gründung zweier deutscher Staaten. Dokumente*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2001, no. 132, pp. 285–87.

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