

Friedrich Kroner, “Overwrought Nerves” (1923)

Abstract

During the First World War, the lack of basic necessities and the rationing of food led to frustratingly long lines at shops. The supply problems continued after the Allied Powers lifted their blockade in July 1919. Rationing measures were dismantled, step by step, starting in 1920-21, but drastically rising prices placed a heavy burden on the population. During the period of hyperinflation, consumers desperately tried to use their rapidly depreciating money to acquire basic goods. At the same time, agricultural producers became increasingly unwilling to exchange their produce for paper money that was practically worthless.

Source

Overwrought Nerves

There is not much to add. It pounds daily on the nerves: the insanity of numbers, the uncertain future, today, and tomorrow become doubtful once more overnight. An epidemic of fear, naked need: lines of shoppers, long since an unaccustomed sight, once more form in front of shops, first in front of one, then in front of all. No disease is as contagious as this one. The lines have something suggestive about them: the women’s glances, their hastily donned kitchen dresses, their careworn, patient faces. The lines always send the same signal: the city, the big stone city will be shopped empty again. Rice, 80,000 marks a pound yesterday, costs 160,000 marks today, and tomorrow perhaps twice as much; the day after, the man behind the counter will shrug his shoulders, “No more rice.” Well then, noodles! “No more noodles.” Barley, groats, beans, lentils—always the same, buy, buy, buy. The piece of paper, the spanking brand-new bank note, still moist from the printers, paid out today as a weekly wage, shrinks in value on the way to the grocer’s shop. The zeros, *the multiplying zeros!* “Well, zero, zero ain’t nothing.”

They rise with the dollar, hate, desperation, and need—daily emotions like daily rates of exchange. The rising dollar brings mockery and laughter: “Cheaper butter! Instead of 1,600,000 marks, just 1,400,000 marks.” This is no joke; this is reality written seriously with a pencil, hung in the shop window; and seriously read.

It rises with the dollar, the haste to turn that piece of paper into something one can swallow, something filling. The weekend markets overflow with people. City police regulate traffic. The lines consume the produce stands. “I’ll have two dozen turnips.” “There’s only one dozen.” Once packed away and the money counted into the hand like at the train ticket window, the next pushes forward from behind: “Two dozen turnips.” “There’s only one. ... Next!”

Somewhere patience explodes. Resignation breaks. Not at the turnip man, who is a big fellow. One also swallows the butcher’s biting remark, that all cows have to have bones. One pays and staggers off. But then the girl in the dairy store, the one whose face is always pinched, whose way of speaking becomes ever more finicky the fuller her store—this nervous milk maid—she issues regulations: how one is to behave as a customer, that shoving is rude, that everyone should not shout at once. Otherwise she can not concentrate on the scale. “Come on, when am I finally going to get my butter?” screams a woman. “Your butter? It is not your butter by a long shot. By the time you get to the front of the line, your butter will be all gone.” And then comes the umbrella handle, a response crashing through the glass cover on the cream cheese. And the cop standing watch outside pulls a sobbing woman from the store. And there is an uproar. And charges are filed.

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