

Dancing the Polonaise (August 1916)

Abstract

This letter from a local magistrate illustrates the tensions between authorities and civilians over the short supply of food in the city of Magdeburg. The resentments of urban consumers were first directed against farmers and middlemen. Later on, they were directed against wholesalers and merchants whose intervention only added to the prices paid by consumers. Local consumer organizations bridged religious and class divides, often forging group identities literally in the streets, where women queued up in front of shops and markets to buy precious supplies for their families. This ritual (often referred to as the “Polonaise”) mostly involved women, who inspired respect and fear from local officials.

Source

“The women who stood nearest to the mayor and spoke with him were satisfied with the information that he gave them, while those who stood further away made catcalls. He [the mayor] attempted to inform the first group of women about the issues and to calm them down, as they assured him he had. The crowd then left; some are supposed to have said: “We’ll come back this afternoon.” The crowd knew that in the afternoon at 5:00 the city council was supposed to meet, and they apparently wanted to harass the city councilors as they arrived. However, because the meeting had begun at 4:00 in view of special circumstances, the crowd was unsuccessful in its efforts. Between 4 and 5 o’clock, crowds of people gathered, joined by teenaged boys and girls, including school children. According to a conservative estimate, the crowd grew to about 1,000 at 7 o’clock. There was continuous screaming and yelling; furthermore, insulting, sarcastic, sneering catcalls were hurled at the authorities, and it looked as if supplies of butter had ceded the main role to an appetite for scandal and mischief. Towards seven o’clock, the mayor emerged from the city hall and informed the women nearest him once again that the distribution of butter could not take place until next Saturday, for reasons that he also communicated to them. These women, too, said that they understood, but because the crowd standing behind them continued to scream and yell, he asked the women near him to convey this information to the others and to calm them down, which they promised to do; and he went back into the city hall. Between 7 and 8 the crowd diminished a bit – presumably people were eating dinner, but around 8.30 they appeared in significantly larger numbers and began to attack the house of a member of the board of the Tangermünde dairy, in whose cellar there were rumored to be four hundred kilograms of butter. Large rocks were torn out of the gutter, other rocks fetched from other streets, where they lay, and thrown at the house. By 11:00 in the evening, all the windows of the house had been broken. Someone even attempted to break down the door with large rocks. The police were powerless in the face of all this; some policemen were lightly injured by rocks. When the mayor left the city hall at 7:30, he was violently insulted as honey was thrown at him.”

Finally the military was called in, and, as the rumors circulated of their arrival,

“the excitement of the crowd grew, and the attacks on the house became more violent, so it took the troops a half hour to drive the crowd away. As soon as they were driven off one street and the soldiers had turned around, the crowd followed them back, and it took the intervention of a *Landsturm* company to disperse the crowd. A number of people were arrested for malicious mischief as well as disturbing the peace. When the troops were present, shouts were heard that the riot would be repeated the same day and again later if there still were no butter. The crowd, which was at first made up only of working women, was composed towards the evening primarily of women, as well as young girls and teenaged

boys – unfortunately a large number of schoolchildren, too. In addition, a number of shady elements showed up, who used the occasion to create a scandal. Even if the riot was initially due to the butter shortage, it took on the character of a demonstration as time passed.”

Source: Regierungspräsident Magdeburg an preußischen Innenminister, September 9, 1916, Preußisches Geheimes Staatsarchiv, Dahlem, Rep. 197A, Io, no. 1, vol. 2; reprinted in Ute Daniel, *Arbeiterfrauen in der Kriegsgesellschaft: Beruf, Familie und Politik im Ersten Weltkrieg*. Göttingen, 1989, pp. 246–47.

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Recommended Citation: Dancing the Polonaise (August 1916), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/wilhelmine-germany-and-the-first-world-war-1890-1918/ghdi:document-959>> [September 26, 2025].