

“The Effects of the Starvation Blockade on Public Health” (1921)

Abstract

Blockades aimed at an enemy's commerce had long been a tactic in naval warfare. During the First World War, Great Britain imposed a naval blockade preventing goods from entering or leaving German ports beginning in March 1915. While Germany was less dependent on food imports than many other countries, the fact that it was at war with its main suppliers of grain, meat, and fats, namely Russia, Canada, and (eventually) Romania, even as it conscripted its farm laborers for frontline military service, contributed to the severe food shortages German civilians suffered during the war just as much as the blockade itself did. This film on the effects of the naval blockade of Germany during the war was made by the education department [*Kulturabteilung*] at Universum Film AG (UfA). A cooperation between the government, the military, and several industrialists, UfA had been founded on General Erich Ludendorff's initiative in 1917 to produce more effective wartime propaganda films. After the First World War, UfA became a successful and internationally respected private film company synonymous with many of Weimar Germany's greatest films. This educational film was released in 1921, several years after the war and the blockade had ended (the blockade was lifted only after Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles in June of 1919). Using gruesome documentary footage, the film repeats the themes of wartime propaganda that Britain and its allies were deliberately starving German children and that the blockade had been an unusually cruel strategy of British warfare. Recent research has shown that the food shortages and severe hunger that many Germans experienced were only partly caused by the blockade, however: poor harvests, inefficient food distribution to urban areas and hoarding all worsened the situation significantly.

Source

How the Starvation Blockade Affects Public Health

Intertitle: Compiled using official material from the German national health department and the reports of inter-Allied and neutral commissions and material published in scientific journals. Recorded and edited for the Medical Film Archive of the Ufa's Cultural Department by: Dr. med. G. Reimann, Dr. med. C. Thomalla, Dr. med. N. Kaufmann, Dr. med. E. Rosenthal.

Part I: The Blockade and Nutrition
Germany.

Intertitle: Germany's own products are not sufficient to sustain its population. It is dependent on the import of grain, animal feed, fertilizers, livestock, milk, fats and oils, wool, cotton, rubber, hides and leather. The blockade began in August 1914. It was enforced partly with the help of the fleet, partly through diplomatic influence on the neutral states.

Intertitle: The blockade prevented food and goods not belonging to the category of war contraband from being imported into Germany, in violation of the London Declaration of 1909 and international law.

Intertitle: While in America (neutral until 1917), huge quantities of grain were stored and in the Scandinavian countries large quantities of fish...[map]

...in occupied Germany, the market halls stood empty.

Intertitle: Goat meat was hardly eaten in Germany in the past. Now goats are the only animals

slaughtered for weeks in the stockyard.

Intertitle: To remain healthy and able to work, a person's daily diet must contain 3,300 calories (as confirmed by the Inter-Allied Food Commission, Paris, March 25, 1918). In the fall of 1916, the German government was only able to allocate its citizens 1,344 calories of rationed food per day, and in the summer of 1917, it was only 1,100 calories, which is a third of the necessary amount!

Intertitle: The daily bread ration was 5 slices = 250 g. The bread contains no wheat flour, but instead inferior additives such as potatoes and bran.

Intertitle: There is no milk at all for adults, only for small children. 1/4 - 1/2 liter for the sick, if available.

Intertitle: The main food consists of vegetables, which have to be stretched by dehydrated vegetables and swedes. Meat is very rare. At most 200 g are given out per week.

The daily allowance for one person is 29 g.

Intertitle: Healthy figures from peacetime.

Intertitle: Blockade.

Intertitle: Hunger!

Part II: The Blockade and Disease

Intertitle: All the symptoms, etc. demonstrated are documented in medical histories, and the names and addresses of the patients and the treating physicians can be verified.

Intertitle: The blockade prevented the import of essential medical supplies for the care of the sick, including medicines, American Vaseline, cork, India rubber, fats, oils, cotton fabrics, and spirits. As a result, there was a lack of good disinfectants, linen, soap, rubber cushions, rubber surgical gloves, adhesive plasters, and rubber suckers for babies. The good cotton bandages had to be replaced by wood pulp fabrics. These are difficult to sterilize, tear easily and do not absorb wound secretions sufficiently.

Intertitle: The increase in childbed fever clearly shows how the sick were harmed by this. (Number of maternal deaths per 10,000 births). [graph]

Intertitle: Statistical material taken from the 1918 memorandum of the German National Health Office.

Intertitle: Peculiar illnesses occur as a result of monotonous and meager nutrition: hunger dropsy (see *Berliner klinische Wochenschrift*, 1918 No. 48). Hunger dropsy (hunger edema) manifests itself in severe debilitation of the body, edematous swelling of the face, arms and legs, heart failure, and leads to death if no better food is provided.

Intertitle: The devastating effect of the blockade is clearly evident in the alarming increase in tuberculosis (consumption). In Germany, the mortality rate from tuberculosis had been steadily declining for 40 years as a result of improvements in public hygiene, housing conditions and state-regulated medical care.

Intertitle: Graph of the declining mortality rate from tuberculosis in cities with more than 15,000 inhabitants, calculated per 10,000 living inhabitants.

Intertitle: It is essential for the fight against tuberculosis that the patient be well nourished. The poor diet during the blockade made this a losing battle.

Intertitle: Various forms of tuberculosis: a) consumption

Intertitle: Statistical material from the German Central Committee for Combating Tuberculosis.

Intertitle: Tuberculosis deaths among the civilian population during the blockade. [graph]

Intertitle: In 1919, the death toll was back to the same level as in 1894. Five years of blockade had destroyed what had been achieved in 20 years of tireless work.

Intertitle: The lack of good soap and the poor quality of its substitutes allowed vermin and contagious skin diseases to spread. The population, plagued by lice, flocked to the delousing institutions.

Intertitle: Head lice and their eggs (nits), which stick to the hair near the root.

Intertitle: The blockade thus not only affected the combatants, but also brought hunger and disease to women, children and the elderly. While before the war the same number of people died every year...

...during the four years of the hunger blockade, mortality among those who stayed at home rose year after year. This graphic does not include the war dead. [graph]

Intertitle: Statistical material taken from the 1918 memorandum of the German National Health Office.

Intertitle: The additional 770,000 who have died are the victims of the humanity-destroying method of the unrestricted blockade against an entire people.

Part III: The Blockade and Children

Intertitle: Blockade babies: inadequate food and care – severe nutritional disorders, sick babies.

Intertitle: Scenes from a medical care center for babies during wartime.

“Nurse, look, here's another woman who has wrapped her child in newspaper.”

Intertitle: With such neglect -- the unavoidable result of the scarcity of materials and the lack of soap -- , the children are naturally plagued by skin rashes.

Intertitle: Milk is so scarce that children only receive milk until the end of their sixth year. Must not the youth look miserable given such hardship? In April 1919, representatives of the medical faculties of five neutral universities stated that German children were exhibiting “clear signs of malnutrition, great hopelessness, and an alarming increase in tuberculosis, scrofula, and rickets.” Numerous Allied commissions of inquiry that traveled throughout Germany came to the same conclusions, and their records are in the possession of the Entente.

Intertitle: At home and abroad, public authorities and private organizations in Germany as well as in Switzerland, the Netherlands, Scandinavia and America in particular are already working together to provide German children with adequate nutrition to enable them to recover their strength and health.

Intertitle: Food being distributed to children by the Children's Relief Commission of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) of America.

Intertitle: These philanthropic efforts are not nearly enough! Even now, Germany's economic hardship is causing a severe blockade – hunger and disease continue to make the German children's world miserable and joyless.

Intertitle: Millions of miserable children are calling out to all of civilized humanity: Protect the world from the horror of a new blockade!

Source: *Die Wirkung der Hungerblockade auf die Volksgesundheit*, dir. Hans Cürlis, UFA, 1921.

Bundesarchiv Filmarchiv; <https://digitaler-lesesaal.bundesarchiv.de/video/2929/691974>

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