The Impact on Popular Morale (March 1917)

Abstract

The command economy meant that the state was the public arbiter of hunger. It was also a symbol of the problem. Bureaucratic imperiousness and incompetence were convenient, omnipresent targets of popular frustration and anger. During the last two years of the war, as the size and availability of rations became explosive issues, crowds of frustrated consumers became the focus of spontaneous incidents of petty violence, some of which grew into food riots. This memorandum from the Prussian Ministry of War outlines some of these instances of popular frustration.

Source

[…]

Whereas the clashes described above were only isolated events, the unrest in the industrial region of Rhineland-Westphalia has grown recently, to the point that decisive measures are necessary if further strikes and disturbances are to be prevented.

The Seventh Army Corps Command expressed itself on this issue as follows:

“The high morale, which was widespread in the population after the declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare, has been considerably dampened by the steadily growing difficulties in the food supply. On top of this, heavy frost at the end of January led to a very severe coal shortage in large parts of the Corps’ district. These in turn imposed heavy privations on the poor and forced a number of larger firms to shut down. The difficulties in the food supply continued after the onset of milder weather, since coal deliveries continued to break down almost completely. The Corps Command had repeatedly pointed out that we must succeed in delivering sufficient quantities of essential foodstuffs to the industrial region in Rhineland-Westphalia, or else strikes and disturbances would be unavoidable. This prediction has come true. The scarcity of foodstuffs that has prevailed here for many months has now gradually created deep dissatisfaction, which has been significantly exacerbated by the halt in the provision of potatoes. On top of this, in the city of Essen the provision of flour broke down in February because of widespread counterfeiting of bread cards. Clever agitators demanded that they be allocated either more foodstuffs or wages high enough that they could buy foodstuffs that still trade for high prices – which means largely against the law – on the open market. In the middle of February, strikes broke out in the Krupp works in Essen, which quickly spread to various mines around Essen and Recklinghausen, as well as to the cities of Oberhausen, Mülheim, and Herne. The strikes were settled after a couple of days, once the firms granted significant wage hikes and held out the prospect of more substantial deliveries of food. On February 26, however, new strikes broke out in Barmen, which were accompanied this time by significant unrest: bakeries were plundered, the city hall was vandalized, the police were attacked. Energetic military measures quickly restored order. Nonetheless, at the end of the month about 1,000 munitions workers were still on strike in Barmen. Furthermore, in the last days of February, strikes broke out at several mines in Bochum, including the mine “Lothringen,” as well as at the mine “Kaiserstuhl” in Dortmund.

It would be a mistake to conclude from the relatively quick end to most of these strikes that the industrial workforce has quietly accepted the insufficient supplies of food. Rather, workers expect that dramatic efforts will be made to improve the food supply quickly. This means above all that sufficient supplies of potatoes again arrive with the beginning of milder weather. Several large cities, such as

Düsseldorf, Duisburg, Barmen, Elberfeld, Oberhausen, Mühleim, and Hagen in Westphalia, have not been able to distribute any potatoes for a full five weeks. Even Essen has been able to supply only small amounts to heavy laborers, but none to the general population. This condition cannot be sustained much longer. If popular expectations are disappointed yet again, new strikes will be unavoidable, which will probably not be settled so easily and will possibly lead to grave consequences."

[…]

Source: Auszug aus der Zusammenstellung der Monatsberichte der stellv. Generalkommandos an das preußische Kriegsministerium betr. die allgemeine Stimmung im Volke. March 3, 1917, no. 230/17 g. B. 6., Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe, Abt. 456, vol. 70; reprinted in Wilhelm Deist, *Militär und Innenpolitik im Weltkrieg 1914–1918.* 2 volumes. Düsseldorf: Droste, 1970, vol. 2, pp. 666–67.

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