Into the Darkness: An Uncensored Report from Inside the Third Reich at War

by Lothrop Stoddard

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Chapter 7: Iron Rations

No intelligent foreigner can be in Germany a week without asking himself: "*How do these people stand it?*" When he has been there a month, he says: "*How long can they stand it?*" After three months, his verdict will probably be: "*I guess they'll stand it a long time.*" Those, at any rate, were my reactions. And, from conversations with many foreign residents in Germany, I believe they are typical ones. Let me explain how this mental evolution came about.

Germany is today a fortress under siege by the British naval blockade. Even where the Reich has apparently unhampered sally-ports through neutral neighbors, its freedom is relative; for the neutrals in turn feel the pressure of British sea-power in whatever may aid England's arch-enemy. In the World War, Germany collapsed through this strangling grip. To avoid a similar fate, the Nazi Government has developed an amazingly elaborate system of rationing which extends to the smallest details.

The foreign visitor to wartime Germany encounters this all-pervading system the instant he crosses the border, when the frontier inspector hands him a few bread, meat, and butter coupons nicely calculated to avert hunger till he reaches his destination. Thereafter he receives full sets of coupons (collectively termed "*food-cards*") enabling him to buy specified amounts of eatables. As already related, the quality depends on the prices he is willing to pay; also he can purchase certain high-priced luxuries, such as game which (with the exception of venison) is card-free. But, no matter how great his wealth, he cannot get more coupons than are legally allotted him. Except under special circumstances, he gets the same treatment as the average citizen of the Reich. Germans or foreigners, they all "*eat out of the same [official] dish.*" Offhand, one would be apt to think that such severe restrictions would produce a thriving bootleg trade. As a matter of fact, underhand trading does exist. But it is relatively small and very much undercover, because German law punishes the buyer equally with the seller, and sentences can be imposed up to ten years at hard labor. For most persons, therefore, the risk is too great.

[Image] German food-card coupons.

Legal differences in rationing there are. These, however, are based, not on wealth or influence, but on age and occupation. Infants and small children get special foods to safeguard their health and growth. At the other end of the scale are two favored classes known as "*heavy*" and "*heaviest*" workers — persons engaged in specially strenuous or hazardous labor. These classifications are prized almost more than higher wages in laboring circles. The most appreciated favor handed us newspaper correspondents by the Propaganda Ministry was when it had us classified as heavy workers. Thereby we were entitled to draw an extra food-card allotment amounting to nearly fifty per cent above normal.

What, you may ask, is normal? The answer is that the allotment varies somewhat from month to month; and, interestingly enough, it tends to rise. For various reasons, the Government determined to start in with wartime restrictions as severe as the people could presumably stand without immediate injury to their health and without arousing too much discontent. The official calculation was that slight additions to the allotment from time to time would produce marked improvement in popular morale. This was certainly true, as I myself can testify. I shall not soon forget how much brighter the world looked when my microscopic butter ration was increased by nearly a pat a day. The difference totaled only a few ounces per month, but the psychological effect was great indeed.

Here is a table of the principal items of rationed foodstuffs for the month of December, 1939. The reader can easily translate them into ounces by remembering that 1,000 grams equals 2.2 pounds. Normal rations which could be bought per head, per week, were:

Item	**Grams**
Butter	125
Margarine	80

Sugar	250
Eggs	1 egg
Meat	500
Lard	62.5
Marmalade	100
Cheese	62.5

Bread, flour, and other grain products are likewise rationed, but the allotments are so large that the rationing is chiefly to avoid waste. Nobody except a tremendous eater could begin to consume his bread ration while I was in Germany. That is because the Reich is amply supplied in this respect, due to abundant harvests in recent years with consequent large carry-overs. Potatoes and vegetables generally are unrationed. So are fruits, though these are scarce and of mediocre quality, judged by American standards. Tropical fruits, even oranges, tangerines, and lemons, are rarely seen. I understand that most of these come from Southern Italy. Mondays and Fridays are fish days. Wartime Germany's fish supply now comes mainly from the Baltic, which is not in the active war zone.

It takes only a glance at the table just given to spot the weak point in Germany's food supply — edible fats. This danger point has long been realized, and the Government has done its best to remedy the deficiency, both by increasing domestic production and by imports from abroad. Despite these efforts, however, Germany's domestic fat production averaged only 56 per cent of her consumption in the years just before the war. In anticipation of the war danger, the Nazi Government has undoubtedly laid up large emergency fat reserves. As far back as the autumn of 1938, Hermann Goering announced at the annual Party Congress at Nuremberg that the Reich had a 7 1/2 months' fat supply in storage, while trade statistics indicate that this figure should be even larger today. Germany can, and does, import much fat, together with meat and dairy products, from its Continental

neighbors. This trade is, of course, not stopped by the British blockade. Still, the fat shortage remains; and in a long war it will be apt to get more acute.

Certainly, the present regulation diet is out of balance. There is an obvious deficiency, not only of fats, but also of foods rich in protein, mineral salts, and vitamins, such as fruit, green vegetables, and dairy products, especially milk and eggs. The present diet contains far too much starch, as the writer can emphatically testify, since he gained twelve pounds during a stay in Germany of less than four months, although his weight had not varied half that much in years. And he met many other persons, both foreigners and Germans, who were having similar experiences. When healthy, well-balanced individuals react that way, there must be something wrong with the dietary picture. Unless remedied, it cannot fail to produce bad results on the general population in the long run.

However, if the food ration can be kept at its present level, the bad results will be so gradual that they should not notably lower the average German's strength and efficiency until after a long lapse of time. When the war broke out the German people were reasonably healthy. Yet this health standard had been maintained on a diet which, in American eyes, must seem meager and monotonous. For many years, most Germans have been restricted in their consumption of fats and dairy products. The war is thus not a sudden change from plenty to scarcity, but a relatively slight intensification of chronic shortages. I discussed food conditions with working-men, and they said that, if they could get their full foodcard allotments, they fared about the same as before the war. These statements checked with what competent foreign observers told me. The winter diet of the working classes has always been potatoes, bread, and cabbage, together with some fish, less meat, and even less fats. They hadn't the money to buy anything better. It is the upper and middle classes who have been hit hardest by war rationing, and it is among them that you hear the loudest complaints.

Those upper and middle class folk certainly *mecker* vociferously over the food situation, but their complaints are mingled with a somewhat sour sense of humor. Here is a typical food joke which was current in winter Berlin:

> "*Recipe for a good meal: Take your meat card. Wrap it in your egg card, and fry it in your butter or fat card until brown. Then take your potato card, cover with your flour card, and cook over your coal card until done. For dessert, stir up your milk and sugar cards; then dunk in your coffee card. After this, wash your hands with your soap card, drying them with your cloth card. That should make you feel fine!*"

These complaints, however, are for the most part mere emotional kicks at hard conditions which cannot be helped. They do not imply condemnation of the rationing system, as such. The German people have poignant memories of the terrible starvation years during the World War, and they are willing to undergo almost anything rather than see mass-starvation come back again. The Government claims that it has devised a starvation-proof system including not merely the food-cards but also the complete "*rationalization*" of agriculture, with fixed prices all the way from producer to consumer. Before the farmer starts his spring planting, he knows that everything he raises will be bought at a figure which should normally enable him to make a slight profit. At the other end of the scale, when the housewife goes to market, she knows that the storekeeper cannot charge her more than the Government permits. The food regulations today in force assure to the poorest German the basic necessities of life while the richest cannot get much more than his share. So long as the German people believe that the system will enable them to keep above the hunger-line, there seems to be scant likelihood of a popular revolt over food alone.

What the system means was explained by Walther Darre, Minister of Agriculture and in supreme charge of the food situation, when he said to me:

> "*Our food-cards constitute merely the last link in an economic chain which we were forging long before the war. This chain extends from farm grower to consumer, with stable prices all along the line. The food-card is the final act of the whole carefully worked-out process, ensuring to each citizen his share of food, no matter what the size of his income. In the World War, food-cards were a sign of want. They were started only when a dangerous scarcity already existed. This time, food-cards, started the very first day of the war, are a symbol of strength.*"

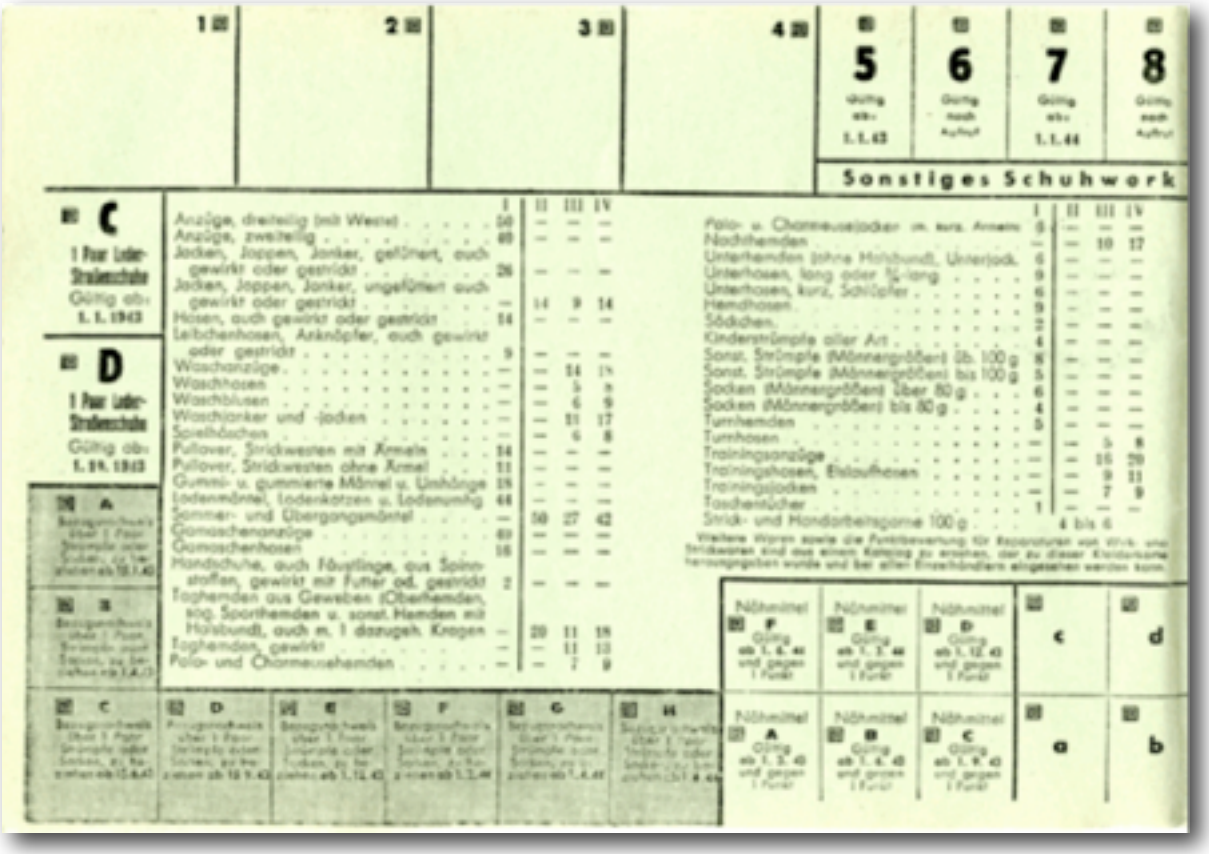
[Image] Richard Walther Darré (born Ricardo Walther Oscar Darré, best known as Walther Darre; born July 14, 1895 in Belgrano, Buenos

Aires, Argentina; died September 5, 1953 in Munich) was the German Minister of Agriculture (Reichsbauernführer) during the National-Socialist era.

Herr Darre's statement has a two-fold significance. It shows both the economic advantages of wartime rationing and its steadying effect on the popular state of mind. This second aspect is perhaps the more important. In the World War, the old Imperial German Government did practically nothing to control food conditions during the first two years of the struggle. The result was a vast deal of hoarding, profiteering, and a general skyrocketing of prices. Rich families laid in big stocks while poor men went hungry. These obvious injustices did more than anything else to rouse popular resentment and promote revolutionary unrest. It is well known that civilian morale broke down long before that of the soldiers at the front. Also, this civilian breakdown ultimately infected the armies in the field. The Nazi leaders are keenly aware of all this and are determined that it shall not happen again.

Nevertheless, the task is great and the struggle complex. Another sector of the gigantic battle against the British blockade is the clothing situation. The Government tackled this problem as promptly as it did the question of food. From the very start, clothes were strictly rationed. At first, this was done by the Bezugschein method. As already explained, a Bezugschein is an official permit enabling the holder to purchase a specific article. Accordingly, if a man or woman needed an addition to the wardrobe, he or she had to go to the Permit station established in their particular neighborhood and state the case. The officials in charge, being themselves local people, usually had a good idea of the applicant's honesty and reliability. With a good reputation, permission was generally granted at once, though the applicant often had to wait in line a long time before his turn came. In doubtful or suspicious cases, however, the applicant was told to return with his old coat, suit, shoes, even shirt or underwear, to prove it was

really worn out. In extreme cases his house might even be searched to make sure he was not trying to hoard.



[Image] Clothing card

This makeshift system obviously involved great loss of time, caused many hardships, and produced much popular irritation. It also did not give a sufficiently clear picture of popular needs. With characteristic German thoroughness, the Government made a searching study of the problem. Its answer was the clothing cards issued in the late autumn of 1939. There are different cards for men, women, boys, and girls. Thereby the Government intends to regulate both production and consumption in an efficient and predictable way.

The woman's clothing card was issued first, and I still recall the impression it made on me when I puzzled over the announcement of it which was published in the morning papers. To me, its complexities seemed almost like an exercise in higher mathematics. Like the food-cards, it is based on the coupon method. The left-hand side of the

clothing card contains a list of articles available, together with the number of coupons required for permission to purchase each article; for, as already explained in relation to food-cards, they are really little Permits which have nothing to do with price. The quality of the article purchased depends on the buyer's pocketbook.

The right-hand side of the clothing card contains the precious coupons — and here American women readers of this book are due for a shock. There are only one hundred of these coupons, popularly known as "*points*," and they must last the feminine holder of the card for an entire twelve-month, starting from November. A hundred points may sound like quite a lot, but just wait until we note how fast they can go and how little they mean! One handkerchief takes one point. A brassiere takes four points; a set of "*undies*" 12; a slip 15; and so on up to a warm winter suit, which sets the lady back no less than 45 points — almost one-half of her whole clothing allowance for the year.

The most poignant item is hosiery. On her card the German woman is allowed a "*normal*" ration of four pair of stockings per year — each pair taking four points. If she insists, she can get an additional two pair; but in that case she is penalized by having to give up eight points apiece for her temerity.

A paternal Government sees to it that she shall not rush frantically out to the nearest store and get all her clothing ration at once. The points are "*staggered*." One-third of the total are available immediately; but the next ten can't be used before January 1st; then twenty on March 1st; and other twenties in May and August respectively. Clothing cards are personal. They cannot be transferred, and coupons detached from the card have no value. Any attempt at cheating is punished by a 100-point fine, which leaves the culprit unable to buy anything for a whole year! The meticulous way in which this system has been worked out shows in the smallest details. Even thread and darning-yarn are exactly rationed. There is a wide difference between various kinds of textiles; woolen articles, which are admittedly scarce, call for nearly twice as many points as do articles of the same sort but made of

different materials. An attempt is likewise made to differentiate between articles of such prime necessity that they are worn by rich and poor alike, and those worn chiefly by persons in comfortable circumstances. The former articles take less points than the latter, though the differential is not great.

Men are even more drastically rationed than their womenfolk. Meinherr must part with 8 of his 100 points for each pair of socks, 27 to 35 points for a full-length set of underwear, and a devastating 60 points for a business suit. No wonder that he was pleased last Christmastide when the Government announced a "*present*" in the shape of its gracious permission to buy a card-free necktie. Milady was simultaneously gratified by the right to purchase a pair of stockings without losing any of her points.

It should be noted that these cards do not cover a number of important items such as overcoats or cloaks, boots and shoes, bedclothing, and household linen. Clothing for infants and very young children is likewise not covered by the card system, though boys and girls have cards similar to those issued to adults. All cardless items must be obtained by the Permit method previously described.

To any American above our poverty-line, the severity of this clothes rationing will presumably seem little short of appalling. It certainly appalled many Germans with whom I discussed the matter. This was especially true of the women, some of whom threw up their hands in despair at the grim prospect while others asserted vehemently that feminine discontent would reach such proportions that the Government would be forced to relent before they reached the rags-and-tatters stage. Ardent Nazis tended to minimize the hardships — at least, in my presence. They reminded me that Germans are thrifty souls who wear their best clothes sparingly, with second — or even third-best apparel for ordinary use. Thus, most persons are apt to have a clothing reserve which can be stretched over this emergency period. Nazi ladies laughingly predicted that next summer's hosiery would all be in brown shades — the brown of sun-tanned bare legs. Still, I detected a melancholy ring to their most patriotic sallies.

Resident foreigners are issued the same clothing cards as Germans. Transients have none, the assumption being that they need none for a short stay. The wise foreigner will equip himself in advance with everything needful. I certainly did, down even to shoe polish, having been informed that, owing to lack of grease, the Ersatz mixtures now used in the Reich were hard on leather. I thus personally suffered no inconvenience, though I was continually haunted by the thought that I might lose something or that my shirts might not stand the wear of wartime German laundries. But woe to the traveler who enters Germany short on clothing! He cannot buy even a pocket handkerchief by ordinary methods. I saw some harrowing sights during my stay in the Reich. One instance was that of an American lady who arrived at the Adlon from Southern Italy minus her baggage, which had gone astray. She had nothing with her but the lightest summer shoes. The rain and chill of autumn soon gave her such a heavy cold that she could not go out until she had proper footwear. She had to enlist the good offices of the American Embassy to have a special Bezugschein issued to her without delay.

Restrictions on food and clothing are merely the outstanding aspects of everyday life in Germany, which is Spartan throughout. Possession of cards is no guarantee that the articles covered by them can always be bought. In the big cities, especially, many temporary shortages occur, due chiefly to faulty transportation or distribution. Shopping involves much delay, especially through having to stand in line before being waited on. Articles technically card-free are effectively rationed because they must all be bought in small quantities; so even persons with plenty of money can never get much ahead of their immediate needs. Also, one is never sure of being able to buy anything, because it may suddenly be temporarily or even permanently sold out. To a foreigner, this sort of existence soon becomes maddening. So he is apt to fancy that it must be equally unendurable to Germans, and he may therefore conclude that they cannot stand it much longer.

Such generalizations, however, are unsound. The Germans have been through a lengthy and bitter schooling in adversity. They have not

known a really normal life since the World War broke out in July, 1914. That fateful summertide was twenty-six years ago. For more than a quarter-century the Germans have experienced about every sort of vicissitude — war, inflation, an unsound boom, deflation, civil strife, the Nazi Revolution, and now war again. No German man or woman under twenty-six years of age was even born into what we would call a normal national life or has had any personal experience of it unless they have been abroad.

No German under forty has more than childhood recollections of the "*good old times.*" This historical background should always be kept in mind if we are to judge correctly German reactions to their surroundings. We see here a people so accustomed to do without things or to get them only with difficulty and in limited amounts that they are used to it. Therefore Germans take lightly or never think about many matters which, to Americans especially, are irritations and grievances. We thus encounter two standards of living and attitudes toward daily life which differ from each other so profoundly that they cannot easily be compared.

In this connection we should remember another point — the factor of war psychology. Nearly all Germans have come to feel that they are in for a life-and-death struggle. They believe that defeat in this war would spell something like the destruction of their nationhood. They therefore bear cheerfully, through patriotic emotion, privations which, to the resident foreigner with nothing at stake, are personally meaningless and therefore exasperating.

I cannot illustrate this matter better than by citing a conversation I had one day with a German acquaintance. In the course of our chat I remarked how much I missed coffee.

> "*I used to be quite a coffee drinker too,*" he answered,
>
> "*and at first I also found it hard. But I realized that, by doing without coffee imports, we Germans strengthen our economic situation and thereby help beat the English. You know, that thought was so satisfying that it overcame my desire for coffee. So*

now I am not only reconciled to our Ersatz but I actually enjoy drinking it and have no wish to go back to real coffee, even if I were given a supply."

[Image] Ersatz coffee packaging, 250 grams

From similar remarks heard on many occasions, I am sure that he was sincere and that he typified an important aspect of the national state of mind.

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