

MUNICIPAL WELFARE DURING WORLD WAR I AS PRACTISED BY THE TOWN OF MAINZ

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For German towns, the beginning of World War I meant a decisive turning-point. During the preceding decades, the municipalities had succeeded in establishing, on a voluntary basis, a welfare system of their own, not controlled and not financially supported by the state, of which they were rather proud. This welfare system included, for example : municipal labour exchange offices, relief for unemployed workers, industrial courts, housing inspection and housing schemes, children's nurseries, efforts to reduce infant mortality, health facilities in elementary schools, such as school medical officers, shower baths and free meals for poor children, public health facilities, such as municipal hospitals, control of tuberculosis, municipal pharmacies, public baths, water supply systems, canalization, street-cleaning, refuse disposal, slaughter houses¹.

Now, during the war, the state intervened and centralized the welfare policy by laws and regulations. For the first time, the state also

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1. For a general description of municipal social policy before 1914 refer to : KRABBE (Wolfgang R.), *Die deutsche Stadt im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen, 1989 ; REULECKE (Jürgen), *Geschichte der Urbanisierung in Deutschland*, Frankfurt/M., 1985 ; details concerning the social policy of the town of Mainz BRÜCHERT-SCHUNK (Hedwig), *Städtische Sozialpolitik vom Wilhelminischen Reich bis zur Weltwirtschaftskrise. Eine sozial- und kommunalhistorische Untersuchung am Beispiel der Stadt Mainz 1890-1930*, Stuttgart, 1994.

took over financial responsibility in the welfare field, establishing a system of allocations to the municipalities. This was the beginning of the German welfare state which was finally established during the years of the Weimar Republic in the twenties².

The war also meant a serious setback to the towns' social policy because quite a number of the achievements in the health care and welfare field came to a standstill or were even reversed, such as the decrease in tuberculosis or infant mortality achieved before 1914.

The outbreak of the war

At the outbreak of World War I, the German municipalities were suddenly confronted with a number of new tasks which they were unprepared for. First of all, they had to supply the inhabitants with the necessary food, and they had to organize labour. Another important task was the care for the families of soldiers and the nourishment of war invalids and of war widows and their children. Further more, the towns had to supply raw materials to the industry. On the other hand, the activities of the town administrations were rather hindered by the fact that quite a number of skilled town clerks had been called up to the army. To prevent the local administration from breaking down and to organise the special war welfare required, large numbers of voluntary helpers joined in to replace the clerks. These were mainly women. During the first days of the war, a local group of the « Nationaler Frauendienst » (national women's service) was formed in nearly every German town, and the administration could rely on these women to carry out a large part of the routine work of war welfare³.

Welfare for the families of soldiers, for invalids and for the widows and children of dead soldiers

Right at the beginning of the war, it became evident that the families of most soldiers were left behind without financial support, as in most cases

2. SACHSSE (Christoph) and TENNSTEDT (Florian), *Geschichte der Armenfürsorge in Deutschland*, vol. 2 : *Fürsorge und Wohlfahrtspflege 1871-1929*, Stuttgart, 1988, p. 46.

3. SACHSSE and TENNSTEDT, pp. 56f.

the salary was no longer paid by the former employer and the soldiers' pay was not sufficient for a family to live on. The soldiers' families were entitled by law⁴ to an alimentation by the state in case of need. This alimentation was not classified as poor relief. The town and district administrations were charged with handing out the money to the families. As did most municipalities, the town of Mainz kept the soldiers' families' relief payments strictly separated from the normal poor relief and set up a special department (« Amt zur Unterstützung von Kriegerfamilien ») for this task.

The relief payed by the state was so low (at the beginning of the war, it was 9 Marks per month for a soldier's wife and 6 Marks for every further member of the family) that it was impossible for a family to live on the money. The town of Mainz and many other towns therefore paid an additional relief (about the same amount as paid by the state) out of municipal funds to the soldiers' families. Because of the continual price increase for food during the war, the relief payments had to be adapted every year. At the end of the year 1915, the town of Mainz had to pay relief to 9 300 families⁵.

During the war, it also became necessary for the state to take care of the increasing number of war invalids as well as the widows and children of dead soldiers'. The town of Mainz, in cooperation with the Red Cross Organisation, ran workshops which employed invalids. In summer 1916, a special department (« Fürsorgeamt für Kriegsbeschädigte und Kriegerhinterbliebene ») was set up to deal with invalids, widows and children of the dead soldiers⁶.

Food supply and the « turnip winter »

Food supply turned out to be the biggest problem right from the beginning of the war. Obviously, the German government had not reckoned with a long duration of the war, and provisions were not sufficient. Neither had the government anticipated the Allies' blockade which stopped imports of corn and other foodstuffs from abroad. The full extent of the carelessness which had prevailed is shown by the fact that

4. « Gesetz betreffend die Unterstützung von Familien in den Dienst eingetretener Mannschaften » of 18 February 1888, amended on 4 August 1914.

5. Bericht über den Stand wichtiger Gemeindeangelegenheiten am Schluß des Jahres 1915, erstattet durch den Oberbürgermeister, p. 15.

6. Die endgültige Organisation der städtischen Fürsorgestelle für Kriegsbeschädigte und Kriegshinterbliebene, Mainz, 7. Juni 1919 (Drucksachen Bürgermeisterei, 1919/21), p. 1f.

Germany had exported large quantities of rye to Russia just before the war⁷. However, Germany had not been able, even in peacetime, to produce all the food needed but had had to import one tenth of the corn, one third of the meat and one quarter of the milk required. In addition, large quantities of fertilizer had to be imported⁸.

During the first wartime winter, the situation already became critical. The government was forced to fix maximum prices for food and, in January 1915, to control the distribution of corn and flour. Only a few months later, the state had to control further foodstuffs, like potatoes, meat, sugar, brandy, vegetables, fruit and cooking fat as well as feeding stuff. Throughout the war, there was a serious shortage of food. The situation was aggravated by the fact that many farmers kept back part of their produce, especially potatoes and cooking fat, or sold them on the « black market » where they got exorbitant prices⁹. The efforts made by the government to control the market had little effect.

As a first step, the government issued a decree on 25 January, 1915 concerning the sale of bread corn and flour. On the basis of this decree, all the corn available was seized on behalf of the « Kriegsgetreidegesellschaft » (war corn company of the state, shortly afterwards reorganized under the name of « Reichsgetreidestelle ») which then allotted the corn to the towns and districts according to a certain ratio of distribution¹⁰. The towns and districts had to organize the distribution of corn and flour on behalf of the state. Like many other towns, the municipality of Mainz installed a « Committee for the control of the consumption of corn and flour ». The Committee bought all the stocks of flour and exclusively organized the sale, assisted by the local bakers' guild¹¹. People could buy bread and other foodstuffs with food ration cards only. At the beginning, the weekly allotment of flour per head amounted to 225 grammes. Shortly afterwards, it was reduced to 200 grammes.

7. FENSKE (Hans), « Die Verwaltung im Ersten Weltkrieg », JESERICH (Kurt G. A.), POHL (Hans) and UNRUH (Georg-Christoph von) (eds.), *Deutsche Verwaltungsgeschichte*, vol. 3, Stuttgart, 1984, pp. 866-908.

8. HARDACH (Gerd), *Der Erste Weltkrieg 1914-1918*, München, 1973, pp. 120ff. ; RUBNER (Max), « Das Ernährungswesen im allgemeinen », BUMM (Franz) (ed.), *Deutschlands Gesundheitsverhältnisse unter dem Einfluß des Weltkrieges*, 2nd part vol., Stuttgart, Berlin, Leipzig and New Haven, 1928, pp. 1-41, p. 5.

9. HARDACH, p. 131.

10. ROERKOHL (Anne), « Die Lebensmittelversorgung während des Ersten Weltkrieges im Spannungsfeld kommunaler und staatlicher Maßnahmen », TEUTEBERG (Hans J.) (ed.), *Durchbruch zum modernen Massenkonsum. Lebensmittelmärkte und Lebensmittelqualität im Städtewachstum des Industriezeitalters*, Münster, 1987, pp. 309-370.

11. Bericht über den Stand wichtiger Gemeindeangelegenheiten 1915, p. 19.

The central organisation for the distribution of corn became the model for all the other central distributing organisations for food which were set up later.

Finally, in May 1916, the government took over the control of the whole food sector by setting up the « Kriegsernährungsamt » (War Food Office) as a central authority for food distribution. The need for this central office arose from the continual deterioration in the food supply situation¹². As long as possible, the government had refrained from this step because the big land owners were opposed to a War Food Office. However, this institution did not prove very successful¹³.

From 1916 onwards, after the centralisation of the food distribution, the average weekly rations per head amounted to the following quantities : 3 500 grammes (g) of potatoes, 160-220 g of flour or bread, 100-250 g of meat, 60-75 g of butter or lard, 0,7 liters of milk, 200 g of sugar, 270 g of bread-spread containing sugar (jam or honey substitute), 1 egg (if available) and 120 g of fish¹⁴.

The municipal authorities of the town of Mainz often complained that the necessary quantities of meat promised by the « Reichsfleischstelle » (meat distribution office of the Reich) were not delivered to the towns in the state of Hesse. Therefore, the fixed quantity of 250 g of meat could not be given to the people while it was known that in Prussian towns the inhabitants were supplied with the full meat ration¹⁵. The old antagonism between the small states in the south-west of Germany and the large, politically dominating Prussia obviously was intensified during the war when tasks like the controlling and allocation of foodstuffs were centralised by the state and the central authorities were located in Berlin.

The most serious problem throughout the war remained the shortage of potatoes. To prevent prices from increasing continually, the authorities of Mainz decided to run municipal shops selling potatoes, fruit and vegetables in July 1915. Most of the work in the shops was done by female volunteers.

When milk became short as well, the municipality bought a cattle farm situated a few miles from Mainz. The livestock of more than 60 cows produced part of the milk supply for the town. They also started breeding pigs on this farm to supplement the meat supply.

Soon after the outbreak of the war, there arose a need to install public soup kitchens. Many people were not able to feed their families on the scarce food supplies which they got for their food ration cards. Also,

12. HARDACH, p. 129.

13. WEHLER (Hans-Ulrich), *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871-1918*, Göttingen, 1988, p. 203.

14. HARDACH, p. 129.

15. This is mentioned in many newspaper reports, for example, *Mainzer Anzeiger* of 20/09/1917 and of 29/10/1917.

gas was turned off part of the day, and many women had to work in the factories so that they did not have time to prepare a cooked meal for their family. Therefore, the municipality of Mainz installed several public soup kitchens. At the peak of the food shortage, in 1917, there existed 14 soup kitchens in the town. In addition, there were several special canteens for ill persons, for children, for factory workers and for middle-class people. Most of the work in these canteens and soup kitchens was done by voluntary female workers of the « Nationaler Frauendienst ».

The women of the « Nationaler Frauendienst » not only worked in the public kitchens but also collected worn clothes and shoes, mended them and sold them at a low price to the poor. They also taught other women how to make shoes of materials other than leather.

The peak of the food shortage was reached in the winter of 1916/17. After a bad harvest in the preceding summer, the supply of most big towns practically broke down. People were urged to economise potatoes and to eat turnips instead¹⁶. At the end of this « turnip winter », when in addition meat was short and the daily bread rations were cut down, people got impatient. There were strikes and riots in many towns¹⁷.

During the famine winter of 1916/17, a long lasting-period of frost also caused a serious fuel shortage. As a consequence, coal was only sold on a purchase permit. Among other causes, this shortage was due to the fact that the ships could not pass the partly frozen Rhine. In February, the situation aggravated. Some towns turned to « wild west » methods. For example, the boat « Maria Margareta » which was due from Essen on the Ruhr to Mainz was seized by the authorities of Düsseldorf. Only when the town of Mainz protested rather resolutely was the boat allowed to continue its passage up the Rhine¹⁸. As a consequence of the coal shortage, the gas supply to private homes was cut down for several hours every day. Public buildings, like theatres, museums or cinemas, closed down during winter, and schools had extra holidays to save fuel.

Children and the war

During the war, the municipality gave special attention and care to school children. The authorities were afraid that many children, boys in particular, might go to the bad if left without supervision. Many children

and youths were left on their own for many hours every day because their fathers were called up to the army and their mothers had to go to work. Many women even had to work night-shift in the ammunition factories. In addition, the daily teaching hours were reduced as several of the school buildings were used as military hospitals, and in winter the children had extra holidays for long spells when fuel was short.

Shortly after the outbreak of the war, the town authorities, on the initiative of the deputy mayor Dr. Karl Külb, instituted therefore the « Central Department for the Welfare of Children during the War ». Assisted by many voluntary helpers, mainly women teachers and members of private welfare organisations, this department ran special nurseries as well as day and night homes for those children whose parents were absent. School children in need were also supplied with clothes and shoes. To prevent malnutrition among children, a great number of pupils were given a free breakfast at school every morning. Some of the children also were served a cooked lunch at school. Thanks to these efforts, the Mainz school children could be saved from seriously starving while a great part of the adult population suffered from malnutrition.

The health services which had been established in municipal schools for many years, however, suffered a severe setback due to the war. The school medical service set up in 1903 was interrupted most of the time during the war because the physicians responsible for the schools now had to work in military hospitals. The municipal dental clinic for school children which had only been opened in early 1914 also had to close down again because the dentists in charge had to join the army.

While, on the one hand, children were given special attention by the authorities, on the other hand they were made use of for purposes of the war. The curriculum was changed « to enable the youth to take part in the great time ». Every day, children were informed in detail on the last events of the war. The purpose was « to develop a strong patriotic sentiment even in the youngest pupils ». In 1917, the ministry of war gave orders to have competitions in military exercises at all boys' schools. At Mainz, a « youth company » was formed which exercised for this event. Girls were not given their normal instruction in needlework any longer. Instead, they knitted stockings, socks, wristlets, ear flaps and gloves. These products were sent to the soldiers as « gifts of love ». Boys had to collect metal which was needed to produce ammunition. They also collected rubber and fruit stones. Several boys were employed as messengers for the Red Cross. Boys' choirs went to sing in the military hospitals to entertain the wounded soldiers. During harvest time, school boys stood by to help with the harvest as farm hands were short.

School children also had to help with public fund raising. Older girls were sent from house to house to collect money on behalf of various funds: the « Kaiser Wilhelm Fund of German women », the assistance committee of the Red Cross, the collection for Christmas gifts sent to the

16. ROERKOHL, pp. 351ff. ; HARDACH, pp. 129f.

17. HARDACH, p. 129.

18. *Mainzer Anzeiger* of 30/1/1917, 31/1/1917 and 24/2/1917.

soldiers and the collection for wounded soldiers in the hospitals of Mainz. In 1916, when there was a general gold collection to help finance the war, the Mainz school children collected a considerable amount of gold coins worth 50 000 Marks. They were rewarded with two days off from school.

Municipal efforts to solve housing problems

Very soon after the outbreak of the war, there arose a problem concerning the paying of rent for lodging. Many wives whose husbands had been called up could not pay the rent any longer, and they risked losing their lodgings. On 18 August 1914, the government in Berlin therefore decreed that the families of active soldiers were protected from the consequences of not paying their rent. This was the beginning of tenants' protection laws in Germany which were extended later, during the twenties¹⁹.

The August decree had the effect, however, that now many families did not pay any rent at all. As a consequence, the landlords' incomes went down rapidly. They got into serious financial difficulties because many houses were encumbered with high mortgages. To help both sides, tenants as well as landlords, and to settle controversies connected with rent payments by arbitration, most towns set up rent arbitration offices. So did the municipality of Mainz. Thought information and with the aid of financial stimulation, these offices tried to urge the contracting parties to come to an agreement. Municipal rent relief was paid on condition that landlords accepted a reduction of the rent²⁰. On the whole, the activities of the rent arbitration offices proved quite successful. Because of fast increasing rents during the war, it proved necessary to extend tenant protection laws. The municipal rent arbitration offices were authorized also to deal with cases of rent increases. Further, they had the right to approve of sublet lodgings. Municipalities were authorized to request notification of unoccupied flats. They had the right to let these lodgings themselves and to prohibit letting flats for other purposes²¹.

Apart from the problems of tenant protection, it proved necessary to intensify house building. While cheap lodgings had been scarce already before 1914, this shortage became more and more serious now as no houses were built during the war. Further, it had to be expected that

19. PRELLER (Ludwig), *Sozialpolitik in der Weimarer Republik*, Stuttgart, 1949, p. 67.

20. SACHSSE and TENNSTEDT, p. 53 ; Preller, p. 67.

21. PRELLER, p. 70.

many young families would be in need of a cheap flat at the end of the war. Many young couples who married during the war waited to set up their own home until peacetime when the soldiers would return home. In many other cases, two families shared one flat during the war to cut down the cost of living. They would also want to have a home of their own again when the husbands returned²².

It soon became evident that the existing cooperative building societies and private initiative would not be able to satisfy the needs of the families requiring lodging after the war. Therefore, in January 1917, the town council of Mainz decided to set up a municipal housing company, the « Gesellschaft m.b.H. zur Errichtung von Kleinwohnungen in der Stadt Mainz ». The municipality of Mainz held more than half of the company's capital. 29 private persons or companies were the other share holders²³. This was the beginning of municipal house building in Mainz although the building activities could not start before the end of the war.

The costs of war welfare

The budgets of German towns were strongly burdened by war welfare. There were two different types of costs. One type comprised the expenses which the towns paid themselves and which were not or only to a small extent refunded by the state, for example the additional relief payments to soldiers' families, the cost-of-living bonus paid to these families because of rising prices (« Kriegsteuerungszulage »), the wages for the additional staff as well as for installing the new departments required for carrying out the war welfare schemes. The municipalities also had to pay the costs for the mustering of recruits and for a war memorial cemetery. From 1914 until February 1919, the town of Mainz spent 21.6 million German Marks for these items. Only 4.2 million were refunded by the Reich²⁴.

The second type of costs comprised the relief the municipalities had to pay to the soldiers' families on behalf of the state. It also comprised the costs for buying stocks of food and animal feed as well as for building military hospitals. Although these costs were to be refunded to the towns

22. PRELLER, pp. 67f ; Verwaltungsrechtschenschaft Bürgermeisterei Mainz 1915/16, p. 145.

23. *Mainzer Anzeiger* of 16/3/1917.

24. SCHMITZ (Gottfried), *Die Entwicklung des Haushalts der Stadt Mainz 1798-1945*, Diss. jur., Mainz, 1958, p. 122. Compared to budget figures : the whole budget of the town of Mainz for one year (1 April, 1917 to 31 March, 1918) amounted to 17 million Marks (without war costs).

by the state or was cashed again when the stocks were sold to the people, the towns often had to wait a very long time for their money²⁵. By the end of November 1918, the town of Mainz had had to advance 12 million Marks for relief payments to the soldiers' families and 26 millions for buying stocks of food²⁶.

Conclusion

German towns suffered greatly from World War I, in particular because of the serious shortage of food, clothes and fuel. The good local welfare organization of pre-war times, however, enabled the German towns to cope rather efficiently with the needs of the population under war conditions. With the help of the women of the « Nationaler Frauendienst » and other organizations, local administrations continued their work nearly without interruption and organized, within a very short time, new departments for the distribution of food, clothes and fuel as well as for paying relief to the families, widows and children of soldiers. This great efficiency of German municipalities, however, indirectly prolonged the war as it made the war bearable for the people.²⁷ Only during the « famine winter » of 1916/1917 were the authorities not able to prevent people from starving seriously, and there were strikes and riots.

World War I also meant a fundamental change for the German welfare system. Before the war, it had, to a great extent, been individually organized and financed by the towns without being influenced by the state. From the beginning of the war, the Government in Berlin started to centralize welfare tasks and to establish a system of financial allocations to the municipalities. They were charged with organising wartime welfare according to the Government's decrees.

The centralized welfare policy practiced by the state during the war was a preliminary to the Weimar welfare state. For the municipalities, the social activities run by the state meant that they could no longer take many decisions or develop schemes of their own in matters of social policy. At the same time, they became financially dependent on the state. This policy of centralization would be intensified during the following period of the Weimar Republic when the system of income tax was reformed to the disadvantage of municipalities. From then on, only the

25. REULECKE (Jürgen), « Städtische Finanzprobleme und Kriegswohlfahrtspflege im Ersten Weltkrieg unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Stadt Barmen », *Zeitschrift für Stadtgeschichte, Stadtsoziologie und Denkmalpflege*, 2, 1975, N° 1, pp. 48-79.

26. SCHMITZ, pp. 122f.

27. REULECKE, *Städtische Finanzprobleme*, pp. 51f.

state was entitled to collect income tax and could then fix the share passed on to the municipalities. This gave rise to many disagreements. As Engeli puts it, « the history of municipal self-government during the Weimar Republic is a history of the struggle of the municipalities to gain a fair share of the tax revenue »²⁸. The origin of centralization and of this struggle between the German state and its municipalities, however, can be traced to the years of World War I.

28. ENGELI (Christian), « Städte und Staat in der Weimarer Republik. Hans Herzfeld zum Gedenken », KIRCHGÄSSNER (Bernhard) and SCHADT (Jörg) (eds.), *Kommunale Selbstverwaltung - Idee und Wirklichkeit*, Sigmaringen, 1983, pp. 163-181, here p. 169.