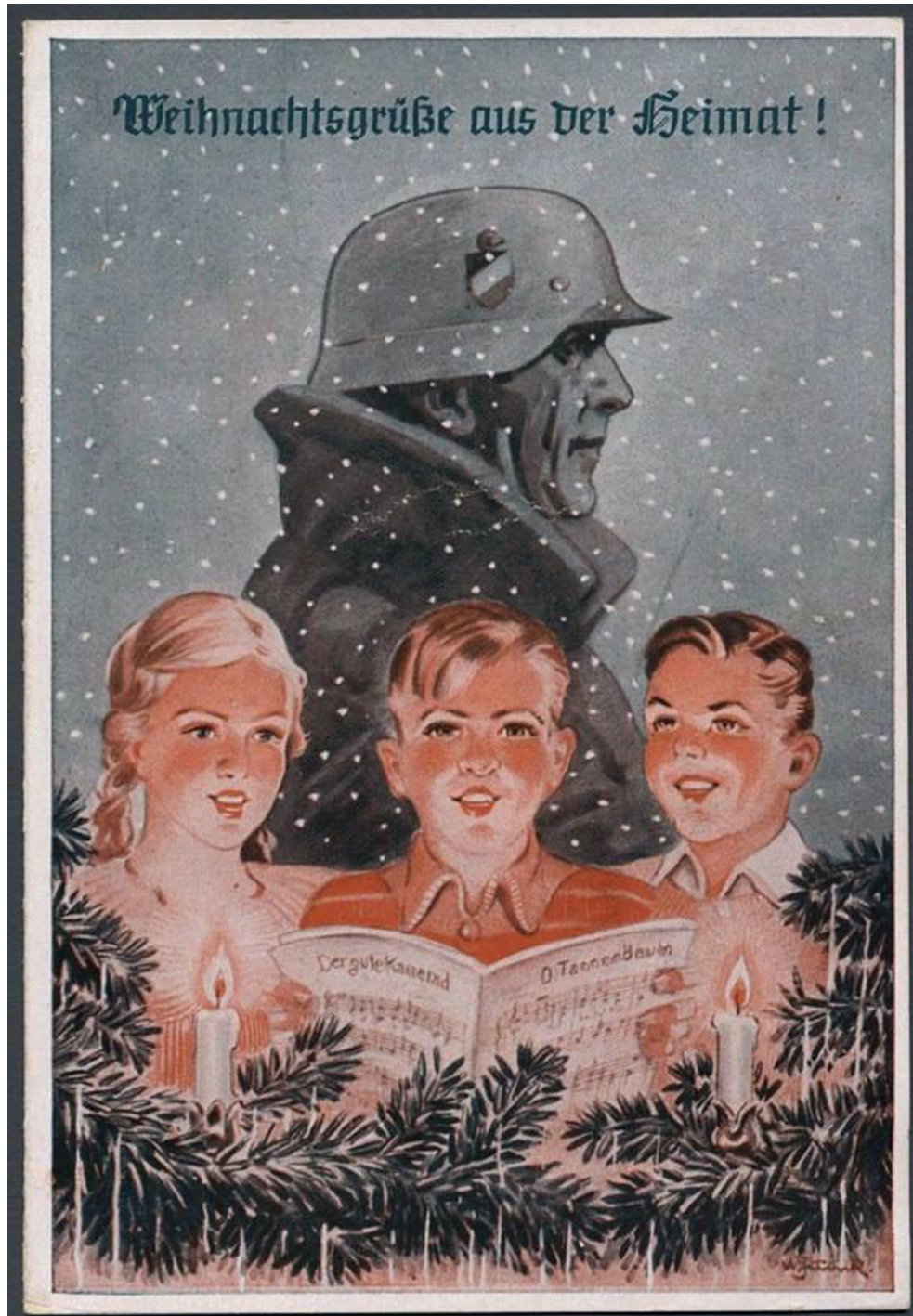


Christmas in wartime Berlin 1939 - 1945



Each war year had its own selection of Christmas cards, and motifs were often found in the chasm between conditions at the front and at home, depicting fathers and brothers as the valiant outpost guardians of the family harmony back home.

This particular card – inoffensive in my opinion, with the children caroling for their far-away father (and not a Swastika in sight) – once earned me a week in facebook prison.

From paganism to Christianity and back

To people in central and northern Europe, the Christmas season has been a time of celebration for ages. Long before Christianity made its entry on the stage, pagans worshipped the Yule (jöl) as the time where winter and darkness had peaked and the days were getting longer, heralding the coming of spring. Thus, in an effort to make the Christian message palatable to Teutons and Norsemen, who otherwise had the objectionable habit of killing or enslaving the first Christian missionaries, the early church cunningly intertwined celebration of the birth of Christ with the existing pagan traditions.

Evolving into the Roman Catholic Church, branching out in Protestantism with the Reformation, Christian beliefs held the peoples of Europe in a firm grip for centuries and affected most aspects of life; medical care, education, science, politics and military affairs and until the Age of Enlightenment, Christianity ruled the mindset virtually unopposed in all walks of life.

The Great War 1914-1918 brought many changes in Europe; geographically, politically and socially. It marked, in a sense, the final goodbye to the old times of kings and queens and valiant knights; a development that had been in the pipeline since the French Revolution some hundred and twenty years before, and heralded a hello to the modern days of democracy and equality between the classes but also saw the rise of political radicalism and extremism.

IN GERMANY, vanquished, exhausted, impoverished and militarily humiliated, the Weimar Republic struggled to get the infant democracy up and running, but political impotence, discord between the old, conservative regime and new competing ideologies led to clashes in the streets as well as in peoples mindsets, bringing the country on the verge of civil war. The 1929 Wall Street crash and the dire consequences it had for everyday life eventually pulled the rug and turned many a voter away from mainstream politics, thus fertilizing the soil for communism and Nazism.



Civil unrest: People fleeing combatants and police during street brawls somewhere in Berlin, 1929.

Christmas, so deeply rooted in German national character, became a natural battleground. The large Social Democratic Party used the season to pick on bourgeois hypocrisy, bogus sentiments and pious charity exhibited by the well-offs in the face of real working class poverty. The communists attacked capitalism as it was displayed in the department stores lavish exhibits of

gifts and consumer goods, tore down Christmas trees and bullied churchgoers, insisting that Christmas should be abolished altogether.

THE RISING NAZI PARTY saw in this situation an opportunity to win over the votes of the worried middle-class, the small shopkeepers, the homeowners and the farmers, by presenting themselves as defenders of olden German traditions and conservative values, taking on the left wing parties in the press and in street brawls. As many of the large warehouses were Jewish owned, it was also a perfect opportunity to point out Jewish greed as the cause of all things bad while simultaneously advocating their own secular and frugal version of Christmas.



Boycott: SA Troopers take position in front of a Jewish owned warehouse, appealing to Germans to do their trade elsewhere to 'protect themselves'.

Christmas Gleichschaltung

Come the rise of the Third Reich, Nazi ideologues saw organized religion as an unwelcome competitor to the totalitarian state and the Jewish ancestry of Jesus Christ did not go down well with the Nazi racial philosophy. During its period of reign, and aiming to control all aspects of public life, the NSDAP thus made efforts to substitute traditional catholic Christmas with a version based on Germany's pagan past, replacing the Christian core message with secular and neopagan elements, incorporating figures such as Wotan, the warrior god, and portraying the nativity scene with a blond and blue-eyed Virgin Mary and baby Jesus.

"You see, it's been our misfortune to have the wrong religion. Why didn't we have the religion of the Japanese, who regard sacrifice for the Fatherland as the highest good? The Mohammedan religion too would have been much more compatible to us than Christianity. Why did it have to be Christianity with its meekness and flabbiness?"

[Hitler on religion. Speer, p. 150]

As the Nazis took control of the school system, the calendar and the annual cycle of celebrations was reshaped with new holidays such as Hitler's birthday and commemoration of highlights in the Party's history along with new rites of passage for the youth.

“The peaceful sentiments of Christmas had no place in a nation of racial warriors”



Nazi Solstice. One of the thorns in the flesh of the Nazis was the Bethlehem star, Either it was a six-pointed star, which was a symbol of the Jews, or it was a five-pointed star, which represented the Soviets. Either way, it had to go!

In the countryside, Winter Solstice was now to be celebrated with large bonfires and pagan rituals. Townspeople and farmers were encouraged to lit candles at this fire and ‘bring home the light’ to their own Yule tree. Although careful not to tamper too much with the deeply rooted sentiments many Germans had towards the festive season, the official Nazi Advent calendar, distributed to German families, did its best to water down the Christian message, replacing it with pagan symbols and martial rhetoric.

Christmas was thus gradually transformed from a celebration of the birth of Christ to an event that was to unite all social classes in a new Christmas allegory where unity, frugality, patriotism and elements of Germanic mythology was to succeed traditional Christian values and the ‘plutocratic’ [Jewish] Christmas customs of gluttony and lavishness.

Stick and carrot

From its earliest days the Party machinery made strong efforts to create positive associations between the Nazis and the people with gigantic welfare drives during the colder months. SA, supported by Hitler Youth boys and girls from the BDM, would collect clothes and money for the poor, thus linking these relatively newfangled organizations with traditional [Christian] values of caring and social solidarity.



Winterhilfe. To further underline the cross-class 'Volksgemeinschaft' [National unity], a monthly 'Eintopf Sunday' was to be observed in all households already from 1933 where a humble Casserole was the only meal allowed. The money thus saved by the family was to be collected by the Block Warden, a minion NSDAP member responsible for a block of houses, and channeled to the Winter Relief organization. An alternative was to partake in public meals orchestrated by the Party as here in Berlin in 1935.

Sunday, 8 December: *"Lunch at the Adlon Hotel ... We had hoped to have a good meal there, but it turned out to be Eintopfstag 'one-dish-day' – a tasteless stew that all restaurants are obliged to serve once a week."*

[Vassilitchikov, p. 36]

The Winterhilfe was undoubtedly welcomed by the poorest, but not everyone were happy. Diarist Franz Göll complains that the notion of Volksgemeinschaft changed since its introduction in the early 1930s. In his view it evolved from a 'national organization of common interest' into a 'new system to exploit the German worker', costing him nearly one-quarter of his gross income.

"Everyone knows that the millions for Winter Relief go not to the unemployed but to the armament program. How else could you strike a balance between the constantly declining number of unemployed and the constantly growing proceeds of Winter Relief? Otherwise the unemployed in the whole Reich must long since have become rich.

And still we go on contributing – on the street, in factories, in metro and bus, at the ticket office, at the door of the apartment. Not because you want to, but because you can't escape the pressure."

[Andreas-Friedrich, p. 60]

"The Winterhilfe was called a 'voluntary charity' but by the mid 1930s had become a method of social control. The Winterhilfe ground into gear each year with the Eintopf, or one-pot meal; families were asked to forgo their normal fare once a month and donate money to the cause. Thousands of official collectors ran up and down the backstreets and Hinterhöfe of Berlin demanding money and reporting those who did not comply. The Gestapo

was inundated with reports about people who had not contributed enough, and there are hundreds of documented cases of people who were punished and ostracized because they only gave clothes or a small amount of money. Some Berliners I have spoken to resented the Winterhilfe but seemed equally indignant about those who had not contributed to it; one lady had to be protected by the police when her neighbors discovered that she had given only an old pair of boots to the 'charity', while a block warden would coerce those in his Hinterhof to give more so that the house would not get a bad name. The resentment against this ritual intensified in the late 1930s, and even as people made donations, they would glance at one another when party bosses drove by them in their new cars and new clothes and say, 'There goes the Winterhilfe'".

[Ritschie, p. 445]

ACCORDING TO ALBERT SPEER, Hitler, who himself had lived through the Great War as a simple foot soldier, and who experienced first-hand the tumultuous interwar years with extreme poverty, civil unrest and clashes between the authorities and revolutionary groups, nourished a never-ending fear for his own people and their rebellious side. Consequently, he was keen to keep the German people content and not put too much strain on the man in the street.

As a result, Speer had the greatest difficulties to shift the entire German industry towards war production and many [unnecessary] consumer goods were in fact manufactured till the end of the war. By the same token, women were not mobilized into the workforce from the outset as did the Britons, and consequently, as the bulk of serviceable German men were shipped off to the front, many production line were left idle, unable to work two or three shifts due to lack of manpower.

Kanonen statt Butter

As Germany went to war in 1939, government austerity and public thriftiness were considered key elements in the war efforts. Rationing on food was imposed from the beginning of the war and people were encouraged to refrain from lavishness in food preparation, both in restaurants and at home. The main dish was to be dominated by cabbage – lots of it – bread and potatoes.



Learning the lesson from World War I, the Food Ministry instituted a complex rationing system in the first phase of German mobilization. In late August 1939, a few days before German soldiers marched into Poland, food ration cards were already being distributed.

"When Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, it had a cleverly devised and well-planned food distribution system in place that would continue functioning until the final days of the conflict.

The public viewed the rationing system as fair, especially since it gave preference to selected categories of recipients such as physical laborers, pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers. The rationing procedure also took account of regional differences in eating habits."

[Aly, p. 170]

Sunday, August 27, 1939: "Effective immediately, food ration cards are introduced throughout the Reich ... Starting tomorrow, the German people will be living on a strictly regulated rationing system. Twenty-four hundred grams of bread a week, 500 grams of meat, 270 grams of fat, 62,5 grams of cheese, 100 grams of marmalade, and 250 grams of sugar. Beside this, a certain quantity of prepared foods per month and 400 grams of coffee substitute. Whole milk for children and invalids only. All other foodstuffs will be distributed after a 'preceding proclamations in each case'"

[Andreas-Friedrich, p. 46]

Clothes were rationed from November that year, and the rations were rather meager. American correspondent William Shirer wrote in his diary:

Berlin, November 12. "The ration cards out for clothing today, and many long German faces to be seen. There are separate cards for men, women, boys, girls and babies. Except for the babies, everyone gets a hundred points on his card. Socks or stockings take five points, but you can only buy five pair per year. A pair of pajamas costs thirty point, almost a third of your card, but you can save five points if you buy a nightgown instead. A new overcoat or suit takes sixty points. I figured out tonight that with my card, which limits your purchase by the seasons, I could buy from December 1 to April 1: two pairs of socks, two handkerchiefs, one muffler, and a pair of gloves. From April 1 to September 1: one shirt, two collars, and a suit of underwear. For the rest of the year: two neckties and one undershirt."

[Shirer, p. 119]

Not just journalists but also foreign diplomats living in Germany were affected. Irish Ambassador William Warnock reported home to his superior, Joseph P. Walshe in Dublin;

"It has been officially announced that, as a special concession for Christmas, certain spices and cooking ingredients may be purchased without a corresponding number of coupons being cut from one's ration card. Furthermore - and this has given great pleasure - women will be allowed to buy one pair of stockings additional to those (six pairs per annum) to which they are entitled to purchase under the textile control scheme referred to in my minute of the 17th November. I am sure that there is no need for me to explain that the severe rationing of stockings has been accepted with rather bad grace by the ladies. The patriotism of even the most enthusiastic women has been severely taxed. Men will be permitted to buy an extra tie for Christmas.

The war has had a peculiar effect on Christmas shopping. Money is being freely spent, for two reasons; firstly there are people who feel that in war-time there is always a danger of inflation, and that there is no point in saving, and then there are others who are buying up all they can outside the rationing schemes in order to provide against a possible scarcity in the future. And in any case more money changes hands during the Christmas season than at any other. This year, however, one is at a loss to know what to buy as Christmas presents for one's friends. Articles made of cloth, handkerchiefs, and the like, or anything for which one requires a certificate, are completely out of the question."

[Warnock Confidential Report, December 14, 1939]



Palais Blücher, aka the American Embassy, seen from Pariser Platz and from Herman Göring Strasse [Ebertstrasse]. The house took a heavy punishment and was not rebuilt after the war, but the American Embassy of today occupies roughly the same area.

WILLIAM RUSSELL, a clerk at the American Embassy in Berlin, offers an account of the prewar conditions for Berliners as the effects of rationing began to kick in. However, the embassy staff had the option of importing goods for domestic consumption:

"Things got so bad that we had to open a commissary in our Embassy building for the use of the American members of the Embassy staff.

In a room just off the grand lobby of the former Blücher Palace, we eagerly bought soap, flashlights, chocolate, sardines, coffee, dried fruits, milk, matches and anything else the Embassy was able to import from Denmark and the United States.

Most of us had a standing order with the Danish dairies for a weekly shipment of Canadian bacon, cheese, eggs and butter. Without these four important items, which, of course, were not available to Germans, we Americans would have had even slimmer meals than we had.

It is difficult for me to write down all the things one could not buy in German shops. Just think of anything you would like to buy, anything at all. It was a cinch that it wouldn't be in the store when you asked for it. Or if it was, it wouldn't be for sale.

An automobile? You cannot get permission to drive it.

Shoe strings? None.

Toilet paper? None.

Suspenders? None.

All canned goods? Verboten.

Rubber bands and paper clips? Sold out.

Other things which one could not buy in German stores: shaving soap, electric wire, candles, any metal object, phonograph records (in order to buy a new record, the customer had to give up an old one), typewriters, electric razors, electric water heaters, clothing of all kinds (except on ration cards), furniture, thread (one spool a month), many kinds of paper and stationery, color film, vanilla, spices of all kinds, pepper, gelatin, leather goods such as suitcases and pocket books, buttons, cigars (one to a person each day as long as they lasted).

Soap was extremely scarce. Germans were permitted to buy one cake of 'unity' soap a month, of inferior quality. This cake was supposed to suffice for face washing, dish washing, bathing and all laundering."

[Russell, p. 153-54]

In 1939, although imports from especially the USA dropped drastically, the weekly meat ration could still – initially - be kept at 500-750 grams; that would sink to 250 grams at the end of the war. Extra rations could be granted to workers in the heavy industry and to pregnant women.

**"If someone has to go hungry,
let it be someone other than a German."**

So in spite of the predicaments described, rationing was actually kept at a minimum in the first war years. The lessons learned in the Great War where widespread poverty and hunger, bordering starvation, sparked public unrest and riots in the streets were still fresh in the minds of the authorities. Later in the war, the pillaging of resources from occupied countries would to some degree alleviate the supply situation caused by the shrinking import.

A gloomy Christmas

In the fall of 1939 the war with Poland was over. Britain and France had declared war on Germany, but no real action had been taken; it was the time of the so-called 'Phony War'. In rapid succession the Führer had thus achieved 'Anschluss' with Austria (read: annexation); subjugation of Czechoslovakia and conquest of Poland in blatant defiance of the guarantees issued by Europe's two grand old powers, but in spite of Germany's success on the battlefield, the mood in Berlin was gloomy. William Shirer noted in his diary:

"Berlin, 24-25 December 1939, 3 o'clock in the morning. Christmas Eve. Raining out, but it will turn to snow. The first war Christmas has somehow brought the war home to the people more than anything else. It was always the high point of the year for Germans but this year it's a bleak Christmas, with few presents, Spartan food, the men folk away, the streets blacked out, the shutters and curtains drawn tight in accordance with police regulations. On many a beautiful night I have walked through the streets of Berlin on Christmas Eve. There was not a home in the poorest quarter that did not have its candlelit Christmas tree sparking cheerfully through the

uncurtained, unshaded window. The Germans feel the difference tonight. They are glum, depressed, sad."

A little more encouraged, Shirer goes on to describe how he himself spent Christmas Eve:

"Hitler has gone to the western front, though we have not been allowed to say so. He pulled out on the 21st in a huff, skipping his traditional Christmas party for the Chancellery staff and his old party cronies, though it had all been planned. Myself, I went to the Oeschners' for Christmas dinner this evening, and a right good one it was. There a good portion of what remains of the shrinking American colony gathered and I'm afraid we all were just a little too desperate in our effort to forget the war and the Germans and enjoy for a fleeting moment Christmas in 'the good old American way'. Dead, they are, for us all – the 'good old ways'. But there was turkey and trimmin's and Dorothy had done an artist's job with pumpkin pie and whipped cream and real coffee, and there was much good red wine, which has been very scarce here of late, alas, and champagne and a giant Christmas tree..."

[Shirer, p. 125]



"Hitler spent Christmas with his troops in the West. On 23 December he visited a reconnaissance unit near Limburg/Lahn, passing the afternoon with the Grossdeutschland Infantry regiment and the evening with the SS-Liebstandarte Adolf Hitler. The following day, 24 December, he lunched with a heavy battery in the Flak Zone before moving on to the Spicherer Höhen between the French and German lines, where he was shown – to his great interest – a trench complex." [Nicolaus von Below]

FROM SHIRER'S AND RUSSELL'S diary entries it appears that the foreign communities in Berlin, especially the Americans – if they had the right connections – found ways to alleviate themselves from the worst restrictions and rationing. This is confirmed by Swedish journalist Arvid Fredborg, stating that; *"In addition to the usual Ration Cards, the Berlin journalists receive extra cards for one person on meat, butter and bread, and in addition they receive special Tobacco Cards with an impressive allocation of twenty cigarettes a day. Clothes and footwear are arranged through special requisition sheets. In Berlin there are a small number of shoemakers who work for foreigners and who therefore have better leather than the others."*

For the man on the street and his family, the rationing, the blackout and the prospect of a new war just twenty years after the last one with all its sacrifice and hardship, well remembered by the adult population, may have generated a sense of foreboding of what was to come, making it difficult to get into the proper Christmas mood.

1940-1942 – military heydays

As if 1939 hadn't been alarming enough, the new year would turn out rather more tumultuous for Berliners and the world. Firstly, the insatiable warlord would cast his eyes north to two small Scandinavian countries, occupying Denmark and Norway almost simultaneously and with little effort.

Next, he ventured westwards, steamrolling the Netherlands and Belgium, another pair of small, neutral countries, in a trust against France. The supporting British Expedition Force was ousted at Dunkirk and France surrendered on June 22 that year. It had taken Gröfaz little over three months time to subjugate mainland Western Europe under Nazi control.

LIFE IN BERLIN was still tolerable albeit frugal as the rationing began to take a toll on stamina and strength of its inhabitants. Russian émigré Missie Vassiltchikov, working as an interpreter with the Ministry of Propaganda wrote in her diary on March 31: *“Supper at the ‘Roma’ with friends. Italian restaurants are most popular just now, on account of the nutritive value of their pastas, for which you do not need ration cards.”* and the day after: *“My free day. Shopped. ‘Shopping’ these days means essentially shopping for food. Everything is rationed and it takes time, as most shops have long queues.”*

In January that year, Missie had complained about a new ordeal for Berliners: *“A new Government decree: no baths excepting on Saturdays and Sundays. This is quite a blow, as one gets amazingly dirty in a big town and it was one of the few ways to be warm.”*

**“These nightly raids are getting exhausting,
as one only gets three or four hours’ sleep...”**

Berliners still felt comparatively safe, however. At almost a 1000 kilometers from London, the city was at the extreme range attainable by the British bombers then in service. The first RAF raid on Berlin came on August 25 with only modest damage to a few buildings, and the following raids in 1940 were equally impotent in terms of destruction, their greatest impact being sleep deprivation of the many Berliners who had to spend the night in shelters.

Friday, October 25, 1940: “Last night we had our thirty-eighth air-raid alarm since the end of August. If the damage doesn't get any worse in the future, we needn't worry too seriously about this particular specter of war. After each raid the populace turns out, curious and sensation hungry, to view the so-called damage. They gape at a burned attic here, a few paving stones dug up there, a half-collapsed house over yonder...”

[Andreas-Friedrich, p. 61]

Extra rations in the first war Christmas

Admitted, the first war Christmas had been 1939 but although food rationing had been implemented from the start, the full effects of war had not yet hit the German consumer and many households had small stocks of

flour, sugar, spices, tinned fruit and other items that made life sweeter. The war was still ‘phony’; no serious air raid had yet hit the Reich Capital; commuting to the countryside (and its wealth of meat, butter, eggs and milk) was still unrestricted and in many respects life carried on as usual. The Christmas of 1940, however, was somewhat different, heralding what lay in store for Germany as the war progressed.



Winterhilfe: Distribution Central for 'Winterhilfswerk', a Nazi organisation collecting funds and distributing food to the poorest Germans. This photo is credited to show the actual Christmas allotments [Bundesarchiv].

WITH CHRISTMAS APPROACHING, the Berlin papers announced on December 19 that there also this year would be a special rations allotment for the festive season. Everyone would be able to buy three times the normal weekly ration of 240 grams each of beans, lentils and peas. Extra sugar and marmalade would also be available, as well as further allowances of cinnamon and cloves to flavor home-made Christmas cakes - but no extra eggs, flour or butter to make them with. The newspapers, instead, printed recipes telling women how to bake cakes and make desserts with no eggs and almost no fat, and housewives were – allegedly – encouraged to bake Swastika-shaped cookies.

The extras were small, but still welcome to people whose diet was becoming increasingly monotonous. There were plenty of Christmas trees available, but few in squares and other public places. The traditional Christmas market in the Lustgarten was held, and was as rowdy as ever, but few shops bothered with special window displays, since it was dark by 4 pm and lights were, of course, forbidden under the blackout regulations.

For children, there was a special Christmas allotment of sweets and cakes — almost half a pound of chocolates or half a pound of sugar candy, plus a quarter-pound of cakes for each child. The toys in the shops were mostly leftovers from the previous year and mostly war games featuring, inevitably, bombers, U-boats, tanks and guns. There were soldier suits for boys, and nurses' uniforms and dolls for girls. Toy soldiers were no longer made of lead but of wood and plastic.

Berlin, December 13. "The Christmas Trees are in and being snapped up. No matter how tough or rough or pagan a German may be, he has a childish passion for Christmas trees. People everywhere bravely trying to make this Christmas seem like the old ones in the time of peace."

[Shirer, p. 122]



An SA Man in the company of his wife proudly hauls his 'Weinachtsbaum' and gifts home. To the right, expectant children at a Nazi Christmas rally. Inserted some decorations of the time and an array of lead soldiers – including Gröfaz and Dicke Hermann - that would have brought cheer to any boys heart.

"Goods displayed in the windows are absolutely not for sale"

Finding a gift for Christmas, however, was no easy matter be it for a child or an adult. William Russell describes his troubles;

"In Kadewe, one of Germany's largest department stores, I bought a teddy bear for the daughter of a friend. Two days later I returned to Kadewe, to buy another teddy bear for a child I had forgotten. The teddy bears were all gone, as were all the Christmas toys. The only toys one could buy were tiny wooden carvings selling at five and ten cents and – Easter toys! Easter rabbits were for sale because the store already had them in the warehouse, and there were no other Christmas toys left in stock".

[Russell, p. 142]

On Christmas Day itself, which in 1940 fell on a Wednesday, Göbbels gave a short speech to the police at a parade at the Brandenburg Gate, thanking them for their 'service, protection and help'. In the evening he visited a flak battery at Teltow, on the city's south-eastern boundary. *"First, I inspect the battery's position with Colonel-General Weise,"* he wrote in his diary. *"An imposing sight. Here is our protection. Then a very atmospheric Christmas party in the barracks. Wonderful music. I thank the flak briefly for providing our shield and protection. And then hand out an absolute mountain of gifts. I feel most at ease with such simple people."*

Göbbels did not record what the 'wonderful music' was, but it almost certainly included special arrangements of traditional carols, such as the Nazi version of 'Silent Night':

Silent night, holy night,
All is calm, all is bright.
Only the chancellor stays on guard
Germany's future to watch and to ward,
Guiding our nation aright.

Silent night, holy night,
All is calm, all is bright.
Adolf Hitler is Germany's star
Showing greatness and glory afar,
Bringing us Germans the might

Alltag

Putting the special allotment mentioned above in an everyday context, we can turn to the diary of Maria ‘Missie’ Vassiltechikov. Missie, a White Russian émigré caught in Berlin at the outbreak of war, describes the weekly menu in the canteen where she worked, on December 18, 1940:

“The other day we drew up a list of the food served in our office canteen. It is short and not very imaginative:

- **Monday:** Red cabbage with meat sauce
- **Tuesday:** Meatless day. Codfish in mustard sauce
- **Wednesday:** Stonefish patties (this tastes exactly as it sounds)
- **Thursday:** Assorted vegetable dish (red cabbage, white cabbage, potatoes, red cabbage, white cabbage . . .)
- **Friday:** Mussels in ‘wine’ sauce (this is a ‘special dish’ which vanishes within minutes, so that one has to fallback on potato dumplings in sauce)
- **Saturday:** One of the above
- **Sunday:** Another of the above

Dessert all through the week: vanilla pudding with raspberry sauce.”

[Vassiltechikov, p. 37]

Not an especially imaginative menu, one will agree and it is plain to see that the Christmas allotments, however meager, would be received with some delight.

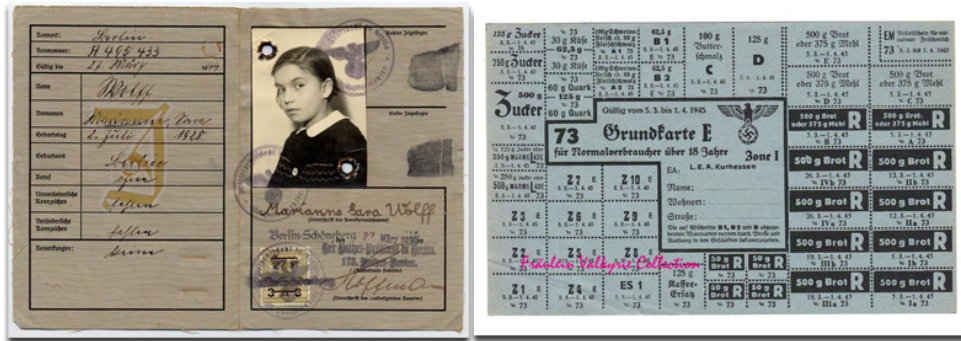
In 1941, things would take a turn to the worse, as Helge Knudsen, Danish correspondent in Berlin wrote in his diary;

“The material conditions in Germany became steadily worse. For Easter, which according to German traditions should be a feast in Eggs, each German received only one Egg, the third one since New Year. The year before, the Easter rations had been 9 eggs. The rations of butter and bread were reduced for the first time since the outbreak of the War, bread from 2250 to 2000 grams per week, fats from 269 to 206 grams and meat from 400 to 300 grams including bones. Almost all city people in Germany went to bed at night without being full.”

[Knudsen, p. 119. My translation]

Those with no rationing cards

The bulk of Jews in Germany lived in Berlin and several had hitherto been rather successful, i.e. great Department Stores were owned by Jews. That had gradually changed during the late 1930ties, where widespread ‘Aryanization’ of Jewish businesses and confiscation of Jewish wealth and property took place, leading to mass emigration of Jewish families. Those who had not managed to emigrate in time, because of lack of funding or because they thought that things would eventually turn to the better, were now facing hard times.



An ID card for a Jewish person [Note the large 'J'] and a 'Grundkarte'; absolutely pivotal for anyone who wanted to buy foodstuffs.

From the beginning of rationing, the Jewish population – in addition to the host of other nuisances imposed on them – were allotted more meager rations than their Aryan countrymen plus restricted access to certain stores and limitations in the timeslots where shopping could take place.

"The curfew was extended [for Jews], rations were cut and food cards were stamped with little purple 'J's' entitling shop keepers to serve them last. Jews could buy yarns twice a year but no clothing."

[Richie, p. 515]

Gone to ground; the submarines

Had you been unlucky enough to draw unwanted attention from the Gestapo; perhaps because you were suspected of opposition to the Nazi state; perhaps you had absented yourself from military service or perhaps you just belonged to a group of 'undesirables'; communists, Jews or other, then you had to vanish from the public eye. Emigration to another country was at this point in time out of the question as it implied close contact with the authorities you wanted to avoid, so the only viable option left was to go underground; to become a 'u-boot', a submarine, hiding in plain sight.

That, on the other hand, raised some serious problems. In a totalitarian state, the police can demand you to present identification papers at any time, and obviously your legal papers would not suffice if you were a wanted person. New ID then!

Another, equally serious problem was rationing cards; the little paper scraps that allowed you to shop at the grocer, baker or butcher and made it possible to order a meal at a restaurant. Such cards were only issued to a valid individual with a name and an address. No cards, no eating!

A submarine thus had to lean heavily on friends and relatives, both for housing and for eating. Had you no-one willing to support you, you were in a bad fix.

Ruth Andreas-Friedrich led a small group of Berliners who did their best to alleviate the predicaments of their Jewish friends; arranging shelter for 'submariners', hiding wanted people from the authorities, providing false papers and collecting food stamps for those, who have none:

April 9, 1942: "We collect stamps. We make calls. Today on Uncle Heinrich, tomorrow on Aunt Johanna. It's a good thing that Heike has

joined the party. Every day the clouds gather more ominously over the remaining Jews.”

August 1, 1942: “Two pounds of meat stamps have come in this week. A pound and a half of canned goods, one woman’s tobacco card, six pounds of bread, three hundred grams of margarine. Who needs what? Who’ll divide it up? Who will take care of the distribution?

There’s got to be a dress found for Evelyne, Heike reminds us. The child is growing so terribly, and when fall comes...”

[Little Evelyne was the four-year old daughter of the Jewish Jacobs family. They had abandoned their apartment out of fear for the Gestapo and was now bunking along with grandparents in an disused tool shed. More about the Jacobs, Evelyne and Christmas later. And it is not all good.]

Black Market

A ‘black’ economy where transactions between individuals fly under the radar of the authorities has likely existed through all times, but amplifies in times of need and shortage. In postwar Berlin a steadily thriving black market was an alternative source of shopping, provided you had money or items for bartering and the trade was fairly openly performed; a hotspot was the Tiergarten area and around the Reichstag, but during the war years exchanges mostly took place in some sort of network; relatives, neighbors or contacts and often embraced [illegal] trips to the countryside in search of farmers or producers with the coveted items. The transactions were anonymous and took their toll in time and transportation costs and a great deal of imagination was necessary to bring the purchased goods home, protected from prying eyes and possible denunciation to the authorities.

Göring’s Christmas shopping

By Christmas 1942, the gift situation ought to have improved, albeit I haven’t found it reflected in any personal memoir from the period. In an attempt to alleviate the hardship for the German population and bolster their trust in the government, Hermann Göring, who besides his main occupation as Chief of the Luftwaffe was also Reich Plenipotentiary for the four-year plans, went Christmas shopping in the occupied countries in Europe.

In a speech to Nazi brass hats on August 6, 1942, he blatantly stated; “I intend to loot anyway, and to loot thoroughly insofar as I am sending a series of purchasers, equipped with special dispensation, first to Holland and Belgium, then to France. They will have until Christmas to buy up more or less everything available in the best stores and warehouses. I will then hang these things in shop windows here at Christmas so that the German people can buy them”

As late as December 20, Göring was still ordering that ‘cosmetics, toys, and general gift items’ be acquired in France. This bounty was then transported in 2,306 freight cars and several barges, ‘primarily to bomb-damaged regions’. Shipments were also directed to cities and regions where war morale was threatening to decline: Vienna, Bratislava, Königsberg and the

industrial regions of Silesia. To the same end, Göring spent 176 million Reichsmark in Holland.

[Aly, p. 132-33]

Exodus of the children

For many Berlin families the Christmas celebrations were marred by the absence of their children. The authorities had begun their compulsory evacuation from the city at the end of October, 1940, shipping some 60,000 young Berliners to the safety of the eastern provinces. Now a further exodus was in progress, with seventy-five special trains to transport an additional 30,000 youngsters under the age of fourteen to safety. At first, the evacuations did not go well — many mothers objected to having their children forcibly removed, even though it was for their own safety.

Göbbels confided to his diary that it had been clumsily handled and had created enormous discontent: *“I had expressly ordered that the process should be carried out without compulsion. I summon the ten Berlin Kreisleiters [local district leaders] and read them the riot act. They are to warn the local party branches immediately and bring order back into the situation . . . I hope things will work out, even so.”*



Children on a train en route to the countryside, the exact year not stated, waving Swastika adorned flags as was it a school excursion. [Bundesarchiv]

“Things did work out. The pressure on the local authorities eased, for there were no more RAF raids on Berlin until March 1941. The British needed to reassess their effectiveness in view of the problems of navigation and accuracy associated with night bombing. Meanwhile, other targets took greater priority for Bomber Command. During the last four and a half months of 1940 there had been thirty raids on the city; in the whole of 1941, there were to be only seventeen.”

[Reed & Fischer, p. 71ff]

A heartbreaking story

Entry in the diary of Ruth Andreas-Friedrich. The group she is part of has for some time been supporting a Jewish family, the Jacobs', mom, dad and a little girl along with grandparents, who is hiding in an abandoned shed, only visiting their apartment irregularly to catch a good nights sleep:

Wednesday, December 30, 1942: *"Cabbage turnips alone won't do it," says Heike. "Sometimes you have to think of man's soul too."*

"What are you thinking at?" I inquire, interested.

"Our Christmas tree still looks pretty fair, and Evelyne certainly won't mind the half-burned candles."

"Then you mean..."

"Certainly I mean. You can't just keep sitting in a tool shed all the time."

We get all our stamps together, and arrange a banquet. Heike 'overhauls' the Christmas tree, Andrik digs out the Christmas records and shortly after nightfall Mr. and Mrs. Jakob, Evelyne, and her Bernstein grandparents appear for a belated Christmas celebration.

We sing a carol.

Four-year-old Evelyne looks wide-eyed at the splendor of the candles. *"I ate a pear once, too,"* she says solemnly. *"A real pear!"*

Somewhere there is a knock on the wall. Possibly one of the tenants driving in a nail.

"Ssh!" whispers little Evelyn. *"Now we've got to be very, very still."* She sits down in her chair with her hands folded, and looks intently at her parents.

"It's nothing," her mother reassures her, patting her head. *"It's nothing, Evelyne. You can go right on talking."*

Andrik turns his head away. Heike fusses around the Christmas tree. I cast down my eyes, and don't dare look at our guests.

[Andreas-Friedrich, p. 84-85]

Six weeks after this, on February 16, 1943, the Jacobs' were picked up at their apartment by the Gestapo who burst in their door. All five of them, mother, father, the grandparents and four year old Evelyne, who once ate a real pear, were taken away, never to be heard from again.

Those far away from home

In 1942, German troops were spread practically all over the Globe; from weather stations in the Arctic and U-boats in the Atlantic to those fighting in the hot sand of North Africa; from the French Atlantic coast to the frozen soil of Leningrad and Stalingrad. From the latter comes this laconic, yet gripping Xmas tale by an unknown soldier:



This picture was sketched that Christmas eve in 1942 in charcoal on a large map of Russia by the chief medical doctor, Dr. Kurt Reuber, for himself and his buddies. The sketch was named 'the Christmas Madonna of Stalingrad'. The drawing made it out of the cauldron with one of the last planes out in January 1943 – Dr. Reuber did not. Right: An artists conception of the situation. Why this piece of history was allowed by the authorities to survive once it reached German soil; pious, emotional and un-soldiery, almost defeatist, is not known. Today it is on display in the Gedächtniskirche, Berlin.

“The holy night sank upon the frost-stiff, peaceless land. The silver light of the moon in the clear night sky bathed the white of the steppes in a soft glow. An extremely unusual, holiday-like quiet reigned on all fronts. Only a lonesome shot here and there reminded us that men had been driven into this peaceful land against their wills, by a single merciless order from their superiors, and pitted in a showdown to the death against other men who were simply defending their own land. In the bunkers, in the fox-holes, even in the very front trenches, a melancholy Christmas spirit was diffused throughout. It affected even the most hardened soldier, translating into a deep depression.

Whenever even two or three of us, bitterly serving our country alone and independently, came together, we spoke of this most beautiful festival which was being celebrated at the very same hour in our homeland. No one would have ever dreamed that the lost ones in the Stalingrad pocket could be able to conjure up even a modest joyful holiday spirit. And yet, we were not completely forgotten.

From our neighbors to the left came the news that the meager Christmas supplements had indeed succeeded in arriving to the unit in time. Everyone received something -- a few cigarettes, a half a bar of chocolate, some schnapps and, for the lucky ones here and there, a letter or even two from home. At that time, everyone who was lonely and unengaged gathered together in the foxholes, deep in the earth. Some of them stayed only long enough to warm themselves and then, with a silent handshake, went forward again to relieve comrades. Wherever there was a bunker, a small ceremony of sorts was going on.”

During the night the Red Army started a tremendous onslaught with artillery barrage, tanks and white-clad, ‘Urrah’ shouting troops galore. The section where our diarist was positioned managed to repel the attack, but with heavy losses. In the morning they could occupy their old trenches again. The words he wrote in his diary demonstrates that the Nazi efforts

to obliterate the religious Christmas had not succeeded among these battle hardened troops.

“This, then, was our Christmas. That morning we asked our clergyman in gray robes to perform a holy Christmas service. Our emergency bunker then became the location of a gripping, unforgettable experience. The empty table became an altar, on which a tiny tallow candle was lit. Lost in pensiveness, our small flock, which had grown together into a deep community, celebrated the Christmas mass. The words of the priest planted once again the message of God's love in our hearts, and touched us deeply. In those days, in those hours, the belief of we Christians in our God was strengthened even more. And only through peace with God, which had been promised through the message of Bethlehem to all men and for all time, were we able to bear the uncertainty which lay before us. No one was forgotten. ‘This peace,’ said the priest, ‘I will this peace to the wounded as well, that they may then close their eyes in the mercy of God.’”

[Unknown diarist]

Weihnachtsringsendung

- or ‘Christmas broadcasts’ was a series of ‘live’ radio transmissions from the various fronts to the Germans at the home front on Christmas Eve. German soldiers at the front would send greetings home from their Christmas parties, perhaps also carol, displaying their good mood and confidence in victory.

The broadcasts had their heyday from 1940 to 1943, starting with the broadcast; ‘German Christmas 1940 - 90 million people celebrate together - 40 microphones connect front and home’ on 4 pm. December 24, with clear instructions from Göbbels that the transmission should bridge the gap between the soldier at the front and his folks at home, creating a feeling of unity despite the distance.



Two Berlin ladies adjust their Volksempfänger, also known as the ‘Göbbels Schnauze’, to pick up the transmission.

On December 24, 1942, the speaker called the various fronts all over the theater of war to check the connection. He started by saying; “Attention, to all! Once again, now under the impression of the last few hours that we experienced together, all comrades - even at the most distant positions - will answer our call and will complete our great Christmas broadcast.”

Then he went on to call upon the individual fronts;

“Attention! Once again I call the Ice Seaport Liinakhamari.”

- and a voice would answer: *“Here is the Ice Seaport Liinakhamari.”*

“Attention! I call Stalingrad.”

“Here is Stalingrad. Here is the front at the Volga!”

“Attention! Once again the Lapland front!”

“Here speaks the German guard in the Finnish winter empire!”

- and so on until all sections of the vast front had been called and answered. Greetings were exchanged between homeland and the front – and naturally, all went extremely well at the fronts – and the 90 minute program ended with a musical get-together where all fronts were singing ‘Holy Night’ in unison and people at home, glued to their ‘Göbbels Schnauze’, were encouraged to sing along.

The idea was – of course – to create a feeling of the nation as one united front; demonstrate technological superiority in dominating the airwaves while at the same time portray the Wehrmacht as being in control of vast swathes of space.

Only problem; it was – for the most part – a fake.

It is possible that some of the fronts in the west, i.e. France, were legit transmissions – what remains of official records are not clear on that point – but otherwise Göbbels’ technicians had pre-recorded the far-away stations such as Stalingrad in a Berlin studio prior to the broadcast, including ‘connection difficulties’, radio noise; distortion, hissing and whistling to make it sound authentic. The whole event was a construct that sought create an impression of a control the regime did no longer have, or was rapidly losing.

1943 - turn of the tide

Come the defeat of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad at the end of January 1943 and Göbbels’ subsequent defiant pep talk at the Berliner Sportspalast on February 18, rallying the audience to scream for ‘Total War’, the screw was tightened on the Berliners once again.

“Rations were reduced to 60 percent of the 1939 level; staples like potatoes ran out, clothing cards became redundant and women made shoes out of straw and cork. Berliners were encouraged to grow their own produce on allotments, but although one propaganda article claimed that 700.000 Berliners were cultivating plots and had 200.000 chickens and a million apple trees the city began to run dangerously short of food. Göbbels launched an operation to close down all remaining luxury restaurants in Berlin; knowing Göring would protest at the closure of his favorite restaurant ‘Horcher’, he simply sent SA men over to smash all the windows.”

[Richie, p. 526]

“The meat ration was reduced to as little as 250 grams per week. The ration of 168 grams of butter and 50 grams of margarine contained increasingly more water.”

[Knudsen, p. 129. My translation]

War is fought on many fronts and psychological warfare is an important one both in terms of dispiriting the enemy and bolstering morale at the home front. In 1942, UFA Studios had launched a movie called ‘Der Grosse Liebe’ [The Great Love], starring Swedish actor and singer Sarah Leander. The movie was a love story between Paul, who was a Luftwaffe fighter pilot and a Danish (!) cabaret singer, Hanna. Once love has struck at the ‘Scala’ in Berlin, various complications due to the war keep the young couple from getting married, but – as in all good movies – they reunite in the end and find domestic bliss.



One of the leading tunes in the movie was ‘Davon geht die Welt nicht unter’ [‘This is not the end of the world’], referring to Hanna’s feelings once she thinks she has lost Paul’s love. The message in the song is that albeit it may look bleak in the moment, some day the sun will shine again and the refrain attained a new meaning as the tide of war turned against Germany; the air war over Berlin intensified and constant danger and the loss of friends and relatives, at home and at the front, became a daily ordeal. The song became very popular in Berlin; played at the few entertainment halls still open and whistled in the streets. The mix of stubborn fatalism and enduring hope probably got down well with the city dwellers spirit, as did Vera Lynn’s ‘We’ll meet again’ for the Londoners.

Bombs on Christmas

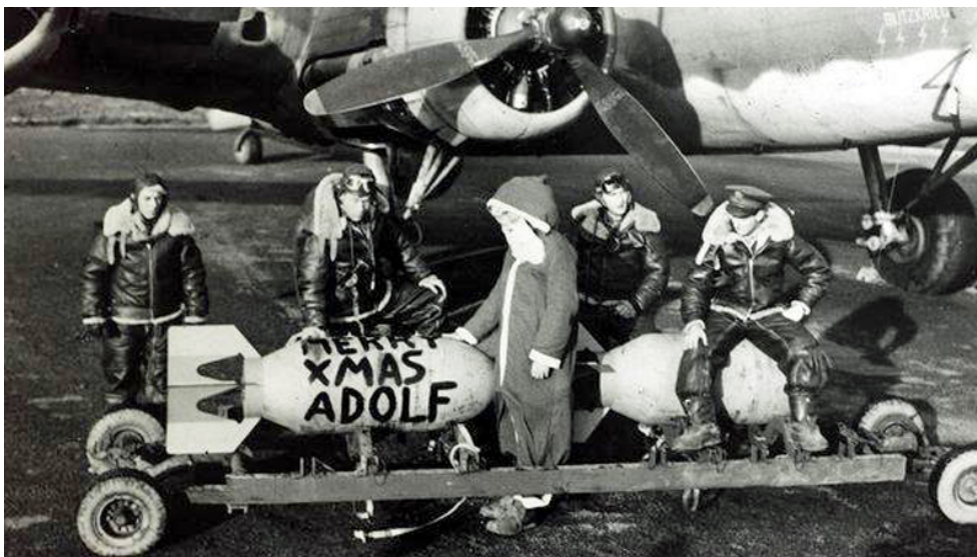
During most of 1942, the British had focused their aerial strength on the German U-boat pens on the French Atlantic coast in an effort to protect the Atlantic convoys from the U-boat peril. In November 1943, however, Arthur ‘Bomber’ Harris, chief of the RAF Bomber Command, turning his attention to the German mainland, launched the ‘Battle of Berlin’ campaign, lasting to March 1944. Sixteen times in that period volleys of up to 800 heavy bombers attacked the German metropolis, and not even Christmas Eve was spared:

“23/24 December 1943, Berlin: 379 aircraft – 364 Lancasters, 8 Mosquitos, 7 Halifaxes. The bomber casualties were not as heavy as on recent raids, partly because German fighters encountered difficulty with the weather and partly because the German controller was temporarily deceived by the Mosquito diversion at Leipzig. The main force of fighters only appeared in the target area at the end of the raid and could not catch the main bomber stream. 16 Lancasters were lost, 4.2 per cent of the force. The Berlin area was covered by cloud and more than half of the early Pathfinder

aircraft had trouble with their H2S sets. The markers were scattered and sparse.

12 Mosquitos to Aachen, 9 to Duisburg and 7 to Leipzig, 4 RCM sorties, 3 Beaufighters on Serrate patrols, 7 OTU sorties. 1 Beaufighter lost."

[RAF Bomber Command Diary]



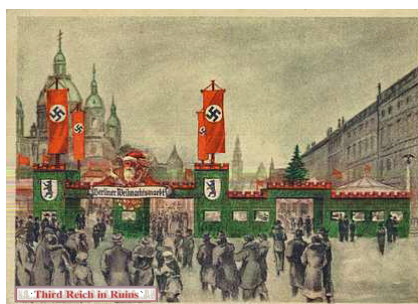
The armors at British bomber bases had their pleasure in adorning bombs with greetings to Hitler. This crew even brought in Santa Claus (possibly for propaganda purposes in local media).

Thus, the war had come to Berliners in earnest. In the night of December 23, the Minter family was gathered to celebrate Christmas the following evening. Frau Minter had prepared a duck which the family – with extraordinary luck - had been able to obtain, when the alarm forced everyone in the cellar. Young Ingeborg Minter recalls what they found when they returned;

"The whole family was excited; it was such a good, fat duck. Mother cooked it on the evening of the 23rd and left it on a table by the kitchen window. A high-explosive bomb fell on a nearby house and the blast blew in our kitchen window. We found the duck full of splinters and quite uneatable. It was very sad; all we got for Christmas dinner were the giblets."

[Middlebrook, p. 192]

A Luftwaffe 'Flakhilfer' complained about the large number of bombs with delayed-action triggers, set to go off the following night; "...a particular mean trick to play on Christmas Eve", he lamented.



I have been unsuccessful in finding just one photo of a wartime Weihnachtsmarkt, so this sketch, borrowed from 'Third Reich in Ruins' will have to suffice. Probably, they looked much like today, albeit the display of foodstuff possible was more modest.

Bombs or no bombs, the traditional Weihnachtsmarkt in the Lustgarten was still held. In the autumn of 1943 Artur Axmann, the Hitlerjugend Leader since 1940, had encouraged his boys and girls to use their handicraft skills to produce toys for the coming festive season, thus making up for the shortcomings of an industry now committed to war production.

In this 'arms race' for the 1942/43 Winter Relief, Hitlerjugend thus managed to deliver 8,5 M pieces of toys to the NSV [Nationalsozialistische Volksfürsorge] for sale at shops and Christmas Fairs throughout Germany, enabling parents to give their children at least one toy for Christmas. Axmann wrote in his memoir:

"So in December 1943 I was able to open the Weihnachtsmarkt in Berlin's Lustgarten, in which the failure of an industrial branch was compensated through the work done by the boys and girls. The best reward for this was the light in the children's eyes and the toys, at the same time, served as a appreciation to the parents for their understanding and trust (in the State)."

[Axmann, p. 305, my translation]

1944 - The last War Christmas

Come the turn of the year, the Berliners could add another scourge to their already burdened life. On March 6, 1944, American bombs hit the capital as 600 four-engine bombers mounted the first daylight raid on Berlin, followed by raids on the 8th and 9th. Altogether, in the first week of March alone, the 8th Air Force dropped over 4,800 tons of high explosive on Berlin.



Berlin from above. To the left Tempelhof Airfield; to the right you can make out Belle-Alliance Platz. Lanwehrkanal in between going north-south here.

Bombing in broad daylight obviously made it easier to hit the target. The downside for the attackers was that the bombers were also clearly visible to flak and fighters. However, unlike the RAF the Americans enjoyed the protection of long-range fighters, giving the exhausted Luftwaffe tough opposition.

Throughout the rest of 1944 and until the end of the war, the Americans regularly bombed Germany by day and the Britons by night. Casualties were high on both Allied and German side, but in the long run, Germany was unable to replace the losses both in men and machines and was running critically low on aviation fuel.

By December, many areas of the hitherto grand metropolis lay in ruins; smoke and debris in the streets, the blackened walls bearing messages from survivors to any callers where to find the former inhabitants. 1944 would be the hitherto darkest Christmas in Berlin's history.

Many Berliners found some consolation in their religious beliefs although some found it hard to retain their trust in a merciful God:

"My parents do not want me to visit them in Rostock. For the first time, we are thus celebrating Christmas separately. I went to the cathedral - beautiful sermon in the crypt. Doering preached. He emphasized our need and distress.

For the sixth time since the war broke out, I heard it now: "... and peace on earth". For the sixth time! Many times I have a feeling that during these six years I have become decades older."

[Kardorff, p. 212. My translation]

"Think practically, give a coffin"

Their men dead or at the front, women and children were left alone, grieving for the fallen and full of anxiety for the husbands, brothers and fathers, who were opposing the enemy, advancing from both east and west. The Wehrmacht stretched to capacity and Germany's otherwise excellent infrastructure in disarray after years of bombing, only few men made it home for Christmas.

Food was scarce; one Berliner, Ilse Nicolas, then just a child, recalls: *"We had made gingerbread balls and sprinkled with almond flavor and shaped into marzipan potatoes. We baked with oatmeal and made cakes from savory ingredients, with plenty of rum flavor."*

Also this last war Christmas, a special ration was bestowed on the hungry Berliners, comprising a minuscule scrap of butter and coffee, a quarter liter of Schnapps and ten cigarettes. Merry Christmas!

Contemporary photos depict the mood. On one photo, staff from the Moabit Hospital are sitting tight in the bunker around a table with pitiable Christmas decorations, as if they were just waiting for the evening to end. On another, a woman and her little son have draped themselves in front of the Christmas tree, behind them the photo of the uniformed father, who is expecting the next attack on some front line, with a hand-written edifying verse: „Ist das Stübchen noch so klein, so muss es dennoch eine Deutsche Weihnacht sein.“ [‘Even in the smallest room, it still has to be a German Christmas’]

ALONGSIDE, Göbbels propaganda mill churned at top speed; the Ardennes offensive, Germany's last military enterprise on the western front, initiated mid December that year, would surely turn the tide and bring the long-

promised victory to Germany. Only a few listened; fewer believed the inflated twaddle from the High Priest of the Nazi Order.

The 'Berliner Schnauze', sarcastic as always, coined the favorite joke for this Christmas: "Think practically, give a coffin" Berliners said to each other, and the traditional greeting when you met acquaintances in the street was replaced by the laconic "Bleib übrig!" roughly translating into 'Survive!'

"Fortunately no "Christmas trees" for Christmas. So no luminous markers with which scout machines led the enemy bomber squadrons to their goals. The last air raid alarm to date was for Berlin on December 21, 1944, just a nocturnal mock attack by the Royal Air Force, which was supposed to divert the air defense from the planned bombing of Szczecin."

[Anonymous]

ON THE BRIGHT SIDE, the evening was quiet. No enemy planes appeared in the skies over the German capital and anxious Berliners, listening for the nerve-wrecking howl of 'Meiers Trumpet', could spend the Holy Night in their beds instead of the damp cellars. In the words of Helmut Stenn, seven years old at the time: *"I only remember that we could sleep through that night; it was bliss! And I wondered if we would ever have a night like that again."*



An elderly lady is gathering firewood in the Tiergarten amidst the wrecks of war during the bitterly cold winter of 1945/46

1945 - Peace, ruins and starvation

In 2020 the British newspaper The Guardian brought a compilation of articles from 1945, describing the situation in Britain and throughout Europe during the first Christmas in peace for six years in a row. Notably, there seemed to have been a general urge among the British people to help mainland Europe in its hour of need, even at expense of their own meager rations, but logistics in bombed-out Germany got in the way. British liberated Denmark, for example, wanted to switch some 36.000 heads of cattle with much need coal from the Ruhr, but transportation in either direction could not be arranged.

"In Berlin Christmas will at least be cheap. Bread is four pence a two-pound loaf, potatoes are three-halfpence a pound and meat a shilling a pound. So,

on present rations if a family of four spends more than two shillings on its Christmas dinner, it will be a lucky family. On the black market, naturally, things are somewhat dearer. Butter is £25 for a pound. Potatoes cost £4 a hundredweight (or thirty cigarettes), and an odd rabbit fetches £12 10s."

[The Guardian, December 24, 1945]

CHRISTMAS 1945 would be even more austere, more frugal than the year before. Adult men had for the most part been killed in the war or were prisoners of war, leaving women to cater for the family. Hundreds of thousands were de-housed and huddled in makeshift dwellings in the ruins. Famine was widespread. Fuel for heating was sparse. Malnutrition was commonplace, diseases rampant. The very young and the very old died in droves. It was a time of misery.

The war was over, but the peace had not brought back the good prewar times. Berlin and Germany was occupied by powers that themselves were financially exhausted after five years of war and had little to spare for the vanquished. Further, discord amongst the occupiers hampered the relief efforts and a new, cold war was looming in the horizon.

But that's a story to be told another time...



A note on photos & translations

The photos in this article are for illustrative purposes and not necessarily directly associated with the text. They are primarily from the Public Domain and often found on facebook Pages relating to Berlin (see list below)

Original source is stated if known, but as numerous orphaned photos are floating on the internet without reliable captions, this is not always possible.

English quotes appearing here may be abridged but are otherwise unedited. Other languages [German, Danish] are my translation.

Further reading

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- Andreas-Friedrich, Ruth; **Berlin Underground**, © 1947, Henry Holt & Co.
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- Bowler, Gerry; **Christmas in the Crosshairs**, © 2016 (I did not manage to obtain this book before deadline, but will update article appropriately when read).
- Fredberg, Arvid: **Bag Staalvolden**, © 1945, Branner
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- Vassiltchikov, Marie 'Missie'; **The Berlin Diaries 1940-1945**, © 1999. Pimlico
- Zierenberg, Malte: **Berlin's Black Market: 1939–1950**, © 2015

Internet

- Axis History Forum: Various postings on wartime rationing
- BZ Berlin: **Kriegsweihnacht 1944**, © 2004
- Chelsea Sambells blog: **Rocking around the Nazi Christmas tree**, © 2017
- Der Spiegel: **How the Nazis stole Christmas**, © 2009
- Der Tagesspiegel: **Wie Berliner die Kriegsweihnacht 1944 erlebten**, © 2019
- Domradio: **Hier ist die front an der Wolga**, © 2017
- German Propaganda Archive: **Rites of Passage for the Youth**. Calvin University

The Guardian: Christmas 1945: hunger or black-market 'feasting' across Europe, © 2020

Warnock, William: Irish Ambassador reporting home on December 14, 1939

Listen to

Hier ist die Front an der Wolga:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91ruylm9rAM>

Davon geht die Welt nicht unter:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p8D126NPTrU>

Volksempfänger: <https://spectrum.ieee.org/inside-the-third-reichs-radio>

Great facebook sources

If you have a facebook profile – and you probably do since you ended up here – there are many valuable resources to be found for the amateur historian and the armchair general. I have listed a few of my relevant favorites here for your convenience

BERLIN 1945. A great place to find lots of photos from bombed-out Berlin and discussions on places, events and technical questions.

BERLIN BATTLE DAMAGE. The ultimate source of what you can find of traces from the war in Berlin today. Lots of photos from locations to visit.

BERLIN LUFTTERROR. The story of air war Berlin told through photos and text with many examples of the horrors of aerial warfare.