

Managing scarcity: food and World War II in the Mediterranean

Dr Lizzie Collingham

Associate Fellow at Warwick University
United Kingdom

Introduction

'People feel they're going to starve,' wrote the author Roger Martin du Gard to André Gide from Nice in June 1943¹. He reported that the only food for sale in the market was an occasional basket of beetroot normally intended for cattle. The bread was an inedible gluey paste and people were living on the handfuls of pasta or split peas occasionally distributed by the Préfecture.

The impact of the Second World War on food supplies was as deadly in its effect on the world's population as military action. The need to secure an adequate food supply for both its military and civilian population became a central preoccupation of all the countries drawn into the conflict. Food was the foundation of every war economy. It was needed not only to sustain the soldiers but also the industrial workers who supplied them with arms and ammunition.

Germany and Britain, in particular, feared the collapse of the food supply system as they had learned the lesson of the First World War when food shortages had led to a disastrous decline in civilian morale, which pushed Germany towards capitulation. During the Second World War, the German government attempted to maintain the civilian food supply by deliberately exporting hunger to the occupied territories. The British rationing policy is often celebrated as it ensured a more than adequate food supply for British civilians. It is less frequently observed that this was achieved at the expense of Britain's colonial subjects, millions of whom went hungry.

World War II, Food and the Mediterranean

During the Second World War the northern Mediterranean countries of France, Italy and Greece had the misfortune to become German satellite states, or to be occupied by Germany. Hermann Göring saw them as sources of plunder and urged the occupation authorities to requisition food and industrial goods without consideration for the impact on the civilian population. From France they took meat, butter and grain, from Italy, wheat, rice, cheese, fruit and vegetables. In Greece they requisitioned every citrus fruit, every fig and currant and all the olive oil they could lay their hands on. Meanwhile, the countries of the eastern Mediterranean formed the hinterland to the military campaign in North Africa (1941-1943). They had the good fortune to be assigned to the British Middle East Command with its headquarters in Cairo.

In occupied France, Italy and Greece farmers in self-defence withdrew into subsistence. As a consequence the amount of food on the market fell. The urban areas suffered. Because the rations were inadequate urban people were forced to turn to the black market in order to survive. They would cycle out into the countryside to beg and barter for eggs and potatoes. Those rural areas where the soil was poor and agriculture dominated by the monoculture of vines suffered terribly, like the Cote d'Azur where du Gard lived. By 1945 malnutrition had set in among the youth of France and Italy and the incidence of tuberculosis and vitamin deficiencies had risen precipitately. Allied soldiers in Naples were horrified by the sight of living scarecrows looking for something to eat, picking rubbish out of crevices on the harbour pier. Prostitutes in the town could be bought for a C ration can of meat and vegetable hash².

¹ Ian Ousby, *Occupation. The Ordeal of France 1940-1944* (John Murray, London, 1997), pp.123-4.

² Lee Kennett, G.I. The American Soldier in World War Two (Charles Scribner, New York, 1987), p. 204.

Greece, reliant for one third of its food on imports of American grain, was struck by famine. While shipments of Greek vegetables crossed the Mediterranean destined to improve the health of German soldiers fighting in North Africa, Athenians struggled to survive on a daily ration equivalent to two slices of bread. The death rate in Athens rose to 2,000 a day and it was not until the Red Cross broke the Allied blockade of occupied Western Europe to bring in food aid that the death rate slowed. Despite the food relief, starvation was a problem throughout the war and, by 1945, 14 per cent of the Greek population had starved to death³.

The German policy was short sighted. In Denmark a sensible pricing policy motivated farmers to continue producing for the market and an adequate ration suppressed the rise of the black market. The prodigious supplies of Danish butter and bacon to Germany demonstrated the efficacy of leniency and the counter-productiveness of Göring's rapaciousness⁴. In Western Europe it was those countries with relatively efficient agricultural sectors which proved most resilient. They were able to restructure agricultural production and to substitute staple foodstuffs with alternatives. It was countries like Greece reliant on food imports and with peasant-based agriculture producing cash crops, which were least well-equipped to cope.

This did not bode well for the countries of the eastern Mediterranean with fragile peasant-based agricultural sectors such as Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Cyprus and Malta. The entire region was vulnerable to spiralling wartime inflation. The problem was summed up by a merchant in Jaffa (Palestine) who commented that, *'the majority of the Arab population has been able to obtain work at good rates since the outbreak of the war [but] ... the persistent rise in prices are now causing unrest.'*⁵

Comparatively well-paid wartime jobs; remittances from men in the armed services and an influx of troops with spare money in their pockets, all injected cash into the economy at a time when there was a scarcity of consumer goods in the shops. The inevitable result was inflation. Inflation triggered merchants to hoard foodstuffs in expectation of further price rises and food shortages ensued.

In 1941 the situation in Egypt was chaotic. German U-boats had closed the Mediterranean to Allied shipping. Only a few convoys ran the gauntlet of German air and submarine attacks to take supplies to Malta. The entire region's supplies had to be landed at the Red Sea ports which were already at the limits of their capacity dealing with the 5 million tons of goods and equipment required by the military campaign. Matters were made worse when the Red Sea re-opened to American shipping in the spring. Eager to capitalise on the rising demand for consumer goods, American businessmen began sending cargoes of luxury goods to the already overcrowded ports. Ships had to queue to dock and unload, the warehouses were jam packed and piles of crates filled with stockings, cosmetics and underwear overflowed onto the quays where they became muddled up with boxes of weapons and ammunition⁶.

The region's food supply began to fail. The harvest of 1941 had been poor and by January 1942 Egypt's reserve stocks of wheat were virtually depleted. Merchants were hoarding grain and prices were rising steadily. In Cairo the poor stormed bakeries, protesting that the bakers were mixing sawdust with the bread flour⁷. There were food riots in Tehran, Beirut and Damascus⁸. Price controls and rationing protected British civilians from wartime inflation. But British administrations were reluctant to impose similar measures in their colonies.

3 Maggie Black, *A Cause for Our Times. Oxfam the first Fifty Years* (Oxfam, Oxford, 1992), p. 8.

4 Mogens, Nissen, 'Danish food production in the German war economy' in Frank Trentmann and Just Flemming (eds.), *Food and Conflict in Europe in the Age of the Two World Wars* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2006), pp. 184-85.

5 Sherene Seihaly, 'Meatless Days: Consumption and Capitalism in Wartime Palestine, 1939-1945' PhD Dissertation, University of New York, (2007), p.226.

6 Martin Wilmington, *The Middle East Supply Centre* (University of London Press, London, 1972), p. 16.

7 Artemis Cooper, *Cairo in the War, 1939-1945* (Penguin, London, 1995), p. 162.

8 Wilmington, *The Middle East Supply Centre*, p. 25.

Consequently, many of Britain's imperial subjects faced daily increases in the cost of food staples. In East Africa and India this eventually robbed the poor of their entitlement to food and led to famine. However, the British could not afford to allow the eastern Mediterranean to slip into food chaos. In the spring of 1942, only a few hundred kilometers of desert lay between the German army and Cairo.

The situation was saved by Commander Robert Jackson of the Royal Australian Navy who in December 1941 had been assigned to head a modest one-room operation known as the Middle East Supply Centre (MESC). In theory this was a purely advisory body with no executive power. However, Jackson had considerable powers of persuasion. In February 1942 he went on a tour of government houses and embassies, military headquarters and royal palaces, where he explained his plans to the various heads of states, colonies, League of Nations mandates and sheikdoms which came under the responsibility of the Middle East command. He fully exploited his one weapon – control of shipping space and therefore imports – to elicit their co-operation. It helped enormously that he also won the confidence of General Sir Wilfred Lindsell, chief supply officer for the three armed services in Cairo, and Frederick G. Winant, who became the US representative on the Executive Committee of the Centre and facilitated co-operation in Washington⁹.

The food crisis was exacerbated by the military quartermasters who bought up as much as possible of the local harvest of food grains. In addition, they competed with the various governments for shipping space to bring in grain imports. Jackson's friendship with the army's chief supply officer meant that he was able to persuade General Lindsell to weather the crisis by eking out food supplies by cutting the troops' rations and releasing food from army stores in small quantities on a daily basis. This left sufficient food to distribute to those areas most in need until the next delivery of grain. A harvest collection programme which Jackson also set up delivered 1942's grain crop to the cities three weeks earlier than usual. Food disaster was thus averted¹⁰. A military debacle was prevented by the second battle of El Alamein, which brought General Rommel's advance on Cairo to a halt.

The MESC expanded into a powerful and efficient organisation which organised the collection and storage, transport, distribution and allocation of the entire region's stocks of staple foods and vital raw materials. Self-sufficiency was encouraged. Imports of Burmese rice and Australian and Canadian wheat were replaced with crops cultivated within the region. Instead of cotton, Egyptian farmers grew rice which was used to feed the Indian troops stationed in North Africa. The resultant shortage of cottonseed oil was compensated for by supplies brought in from Sudan. Regionally grown barley was transported by rail rather than ship to the Arabian Peninsula, Cyprus and Palestine¹¹. Ethiopia supplied wheat and millet. Efforts were made to salvage tin from scrap metal and sulphuric acid, produced in the manufacture of kerosene, was channelled into the production of phosphate fertilizers. In order to cut down the area's demands on shipping, as much as possible was transported by truck or train. And the region's trains were converted from coal- to diesel-powered engines which saved huge amounts of shipping space. An army of efficient bureaucrats checked every request for every item against a list of products available elsewhere in the region.

The need for an import was weighed up against a host of other requests and prioritised accordingly. Marshall Macduffie, an American seconded to the MESC, described a meeting to review import licences where seven trim men in British army uniforms gathered around a table covered in sheaves of paper. Each paper was picked up and passed down the line of men in turn who discussed it in the low tones of a tobacco auction. By the end of an hour several hundred claims had been efficiently processed without Macduffie having understood a word of what had been said¹². The MESC succeeded in cutting the tonnage entering the region's ports by more than half.

⁹ Wilmington, The Middle East Supply Centre, p. 85.

¹⁰ Wilmington, The Middle East Supply Centre, p. 117.

¹¹ E.M.H. Lloyd, *Food and Inflation in the Middle East 1940–1945* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1956), pp. 30, 55, 58, 65.

¹² Wilmington, The Middle East Supply Centre, p., p. 84.

Macduffie was impressed by the MESC's ability to rustle up experts whenever they were needed. It analysed the professional qualifications of all the men and women serving in the area and, if they were likely to prove useful, re-assigned them. Businessmen, old colonial hands, experts in agronomy, were tracked down and sent off to set up irrigation projects and improve seed selection in Syria, advance animal husbandry in Lebanon and introduce fertilizers and mixed farming in Iran¹³. One of MESC's most ambitious agricultural projects used the army to lay poisonous bait in the breeding grounds of locusts from southern Arabia to Kenya. Those locusts which escaped this onslaught were sprayed in the air by the RAF and the Soviet air force (who almost never co-operated with civilian schemes). By this means the 1943–44 harvest was saved from the depredations of this rapacious insect¹⁴.

One of the keys to the success of the MESC was that it was able to implement a holistic approach to the region's supply problems. By including the military in his schemes Jackson was able to ameliorate the impact on the civilian population of military competition for scarce resources. A black market did exist and the region was afflicted by periodic bread shortages, however, the MESC managed to hold inflation in check while for some the food situation may even have improved. Infant mortality declined in Egypt, which is usually an indicator of satisfactory nutrition¹⁵.

Conclusion

The effective management and regional co-operation implemented in the eastern Mediterranean makes a sobering contrast to India where the colonial government complacently presided over a nationwide food shortage which developed into a full-scale famine in Bengal. In the view of Leo Amery, Secretary of State for India, the failure of the government to protect the sub-continent's inhabitants from the inflationary consequences of war were, 'the worst blow we have had to our name as an Empire in our lifetime'¹⁶. Millions of Indians died of starvation before the government was galvanized into action. In India the British could afford to allow a civilian catastrophe to develop, but they simply could not take such a risk in the Middle East.

The strategies implemented in the eastern Mediterranean demonstrate that given the political will, it was possible for governments to sustain a military campaign in vulnerable regions without endangering the food security of the civilian population.

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¹³ Wilmington, *The Middle East Supply Centre*, p. 81

¹⁴ Wilmington, *The Middle East Supply Centre*, pp. 121–24.

¹⁵ Lloyd, *Food and Inflation*, pp. 327–9.

¹⁶ Alex von Tunzelmann, *Indian Summer. The Secret History of the End of Empire* (Simon & Schuster, London, 2007), p. 391.