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Source: *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 4, The Occupation of Enemy Territory (Winter, 1943), pp. 618-628
Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Association for Public Opinion Research
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2745632
Accessed: 07-01-2025 10:15 UTC

FOOD AND FEEDING IN OCCUPIED TERRITORY

By MARGARET MEAD

FEEDING a population which, through the destruction of war, is unable to look after its own needs, requires more than moving in thus and so many shiploads of flour and soybeans. Hunger is a powerful motive; but the food habits of a people are also compelling and exacting. To gain maximum cooperation from the population of an occupied area, one must not only assuage hunger but take steps toward the recognition of prevailing food habits. Under the latter heading come a variety of problems—the public relations of food distribution. To that problem Dr. Mead devotes her article.

Executive Secretary of the Committee on Food Habits of the National Research Council —in which capacity she has been working on many of the questions discussed in these pages —the author is also known for her pioneering anthropological studies of several primitive cultures. Her most recent book, a study of American culture, was published this year under the title, *And Keep Your Powder Dry*. She has recently returned from England, where she had a chance to sample expert British opinion on food problems.

IN DISCUSSING THE RELATIONSHIP between methods of food distribution and military government, it is first necessary to distinguish between possible and contrasting frames of reference. (1) Will the methods of food distribution be the same as or different from those of (a) previous administration by either fascist invaders or the country's own fascist government, or (b) projected methods of relief which may be expected to follow the period of military government? (2) Will the food distribution be regarded as a weapon, to be used as other weapons are used to further strictly military ends, or as a constructive measure for the reestablishment, not merely of a minimum of law and order necessary to the successful conduct of military operations, but of a more fundamental law and order based upon a consideration of the internal needs of the liberated society?

These problems, while basic to all considerations of military government, are perhaps especially fundamental to the question of food distribution. The process of feeding people is a continuous, ongoing repetitious process that is both particularly suitable for the establishment of continuities and extremely sensitive for the registering of discontinuities. A good meal or an adequate supply of food in the shops one week serves only to highlight a bad meal or a failure of supply in the shops the following week. Abrupt transitions from one policy to another will not

be registered once, as they might be in a regulation concerning reopening of business or resumption of transportation, but will be registered over and over again, for each act of food purchase and for each mass feeding operation, two or three times in each day. Once the question of type and degree of continuity has been established, therefore, as a matter of policy in a given area—i.e., will we wish to demonstrate that our power to feed the local population is equal to, greater than, or less than the previous authorities, and similar to or dissimilar to the procedures of those authorities?—this decision can be expressed in the methods of handling the whole food problem perhaps more concretely and repeatedly than in any other aspect of military government.

Food is important, however, for other psychological reasons. Giving of food is associated the world over with the cherishing of and responsible activities of parents toward dependent children; thus whenever a people feels that its food supply is in the hands of an authority, it tends to regard that authority as to some degree parental. As a matter of practice this means that feeding people adequately, either by the conspicuous regulation of commercially available supplies or by the provision of emergency mass feeding operations, is an efficient way of establishing the existing authority as a good parent toward whom the people assume an attitude of dependency. Probably no other operation, even the provision of hospitalization and emergency care, is so effective in proving to an anxious and disturbed people that the powers that be are good and have their welfare at heart.

But because of this very association, food is also particularly likely to be taken as a sign that the government does not have the interests of the people at heart. Food that is unfamiliar, food that is spoiled or tainted, insufficient or repugnant, will be seized upon and resented as a proof of hostile and unfriendly intentions.[1] People who have been eating flour so filled with maggots that it was necessary to consume them as part of the dish may have accepted this food thankfully when the flour was the fruit of their own efforts. But let them find one single maggot in flour given to them by a superior and external power, and they may regard it as an irrefutable proof of neglect and abuse.

A third factor of importance lies in the emphasis which all peoples put upon aspects of the food situation which are not primarily dependent upon the food itself. How the food is prepared is often more important

[1] Hunt, Edward Eyre. *War bread.* New York: Holt, 1916.

than what is served; a new type of flour baked into a familiar-looking biscuit may be more acceptable than an old type of flour served in an unfamiliar form. Such details as the way in which food is served, or the form in which it is sold, and the extent to which the emergency methods avoid the contravening of old habits of shopping, food preparation, and food service may loom disproportionately large in making a new food policy acceptable, but they also provide an area which can be more easily manipulated than the food itself.

Basic steps in planning any food program in a newly occupied or liberated area would, therefore, comprise:

(1) Determination of policy. Is the food program to be used as military strategy to provide a sharp contrast between previous administrations and the present one? Is it to be used to build good will or merely to prevent rioting, to implement the developing of local responsibility of some one group in the population or to provide the background for some working rapprochement between different political elements in the community? In the solution of these problems, one warning is pertinent. The use of food for destructive purposes—and included here are all uses where the word *food* could be used as a synonym for the word *weapon*—already involves a basic psychological contradiction, because food is universally thought of as something good in itself. When anything which has been revered and cherished by men as a symbol of kindness and goodness has to be used as a part of a destructive policy, important resistances are aroused; and arousing resistances is expensive. If food can be used to win allegiance to and establish faith in the occupying military government rather than for the discrediting of former governments, so much the better, for such a course follows the path of least resistance. If, furthermore, feeding the local civilian population is presented as undertaken merely so that they will not riot, impede troop movements, or provide a breeding ground for disease, a base for resentment in the civilian population will be established. This resentment, focused on the food itself, its content, its quality, its quantity, etc., will provide a fertile source of dissatisfaction. It becomes doubly important, on the other hand, that the occupying liberators should at least outdo in conspicuous respects the measures previously taken by the enemy occupiers—and inevitably regarded as partially or wholly hostile. If there is less to eat or less than one wants to eat under liberators than under conquerors, there will be difficulty.

(2) Knowledge of the patterns of food distribution, preparation, and consumption of the people, and knowledge of the ways in which these have been disturbed during enemy occupation or under blockade will also be essential to intelligent planning.[2] Not only will it be desirable to know general dietary habits—whether a given people eat one grain or another, prefer root or green vegetables, depend upon beans or eggs or whole cereals for their protein supplies; it will also be very desirable to have available considerable particular knowledge in such matters as seasoning, acceptance of or aversion to specific food combinations or methods of food preparation. Very often a failure in some small detail may condemn a whole program. Conversely, some very small familiar detail meticulously observed may loom so large that many unfamiliar features will be forgiven. Allied food advisers should have on hand organized and available data on such matters, so that they may either (a) follow to the letter the traditional food distribution methods of the people, or (b) specifically disregard those methods if for any reason they wish to dissociate themselves from the local authorities or the traditional procedure.

Although busy administrators may occasionally be impatient of the details of local traditional practices, feeling that there is little time or justification for catering to the particular local preferences of a people, there may come moments when they will be glad of the increased control such knowledge provides the administrator. Following local custom, to be sure, is not always necessary. Where supplies are abundant, methods of distribution pleasant and practical, it may be quite feasible to flout a large part of native prejudice. But when supplies fail or tension develops, it is handy to have in reserve a more delicate tool for expressing to the civilian population an active concern for their welfare. Furthermore, if an administrator decides to feed people in mixed groups, or as families, or to separate the sexes, or to separate parents from children—for purely administrative reasons which are quite independent of local custom—it is valuable for him to know whether he is or is not flouting local custom. Only so can he fully judge the wisdom of the particular procedure.

Supplementary to such basic knowledge of food practices, a valuable item will be knowledge of how these practices—including here such details as method of shopping, form in which foods have traditionally

[2] Bourne, Geoffrey H. *Starvation in Europe.* London: Allen and Unwin, 1943. This volume contains a summary of food and rationing conditions in occupied Europe.

been purchased and transported, times of meals, composition of the social group which eats together, etc.—have been disturbed by the wartime situation and which disturbances have been most deplored or resented. Sometimes people lament the lack of a beverage like tea or coffee more loudly than the disappearance of some basic staple of their diet. It might be good strategy to make a special effort to supply the beverage or seasoning in some very conspicuous fashion. The attitude of the British people toward oranges and lemons at the present time is a case in point. A citrus fruit apiece for the entire population, of negligible importance nutritionally, would have tremendous value for morale.

(3) Both the explicit goals to be attained and the knowledge of local custom must be adapted to the available supplies of food. The problem is different for military government from what it would be for a civilian agency bringing in special supplies designated for relief purposes.[3] Whether or not the available food is to be supplemented by foraging operations within the country, military occupations may be expected to use, at least in the initial stages, the standard supplies of the army. Foods which may be admirably suitable for inexpensive relief operations, such as vegetable proteins, may not be included in the standard army foods. Although the army foods will probably be superior in both variety and in quality to foods planned as part of large-scale relief operations, they may have been processed and preserved in forms which are extremely alien to the food practices of the particular country. Army equipment, furthermore, adjusted as it is to the cooking of American food, may be unsuitable for preparing foods differing very much in style.[4]

Two problems will then confront the food administrator: what should be left out or disguised in the army supplies because it will not be possible to continue them under civilian relief administration; and to what degree and in what way is the unfamiliarity of food and equipment to be compensated for by other measures?

The possibly striking discrepancies between feeding with army supplies and feeding under civilian relief may be illustrated by flour.

[3] Committee on Food Habits (National Research Council), "Feeding liberated countries and nutrition education, *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 1943, 19, 259-73. See also Mitchell, Helen S., "Planning foods for foreign relief," *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 1943, 19, in press.

[4] Such a discrepancy in equipment was found when equipment designed for mass feeding operations in England was found unsuitable for Scotland, where a different type of container was needed for the broth which plays a larger part in the Scottish traditional diet.

The Army uses white flour. Both nutritional considerations and a greater attention to local food practices in many parts of Europe would dictate the use of long extraction dark flour, which would provide nutrients to the undernourished people. Yet experience all over the world—including relief feeding in China and the way in which European immigrants to the United States rapidly shift to and subsequently insist stubbornly upon having white flour—has demonstrated that white flour is usually preferred to dark. People in occupied countries will have been eating bread of exceedingly unpleasing quality, heavily extended with potatoes and other substitutes. It will look exceedingly tempting to demonstrate the superiority of the liberators by distributing bread made of white flour. The introduction of white flour after the last war is still remembered with enthusiasm by adults who were then children. But if this is done, the task of returning to a food regime administered by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration or by local civilian agencies, both of which may be forced by considerations of nutrition, economy, and local milling practice into the use of dark flour, will be made exceedingly difficult.

If white flour is used extensively, then there will be other problems as well: Should the desirability of the white flour perhaps be balanced by some method of seasoning which is alien to the people, so that the dark flour which forms a later stage in the program may be presented to them with all the weighting given by familiarity? Should the white flour be labelled as a compensation for some other item in the emergency diet which is disliked? The problem illustrates the double-edged character of any strategy connected with food. Sometimes it may be wise to conform to the local patterns as much as possible and to make the food given under emergency conditions as attractive and familiar as possible, and sometimes it may not. In a short-time operation, limited by the many other considerations which must operate in the case of a military occupation, it may be wiser to label the food and the methods of preparation as exceptional, to stress discontinuity rather than continuity. The specific question of the use of white flour—unavoidable in the case of the Army, indefensible in the case of UNRRA—however it may be decided, points up the responsibility of the military government for taking into account the problems of the relief agencies which will follow it and for reckoning with the scarcities and deprivations which have existed prior to liberation.

If the military authorities do elect to make the food used in mass feeding as acceptable as possible, the surest method of doing so will be to employ in the preparation large numbers of the local population, who will automatically adapt the supplies to local tastes. As examples of the way in which foods may be adapted to local patterns, attention may be called to a series of experiments conducted on behalf of the Office of Foreign Relief and Rehabilitations Operations by the Committee on Food Habits.[5] Sample foods developed to meet the requirements of available supply, nutritional requirements, and the necessities of processing, packaging, and transportation, were presented to groups of women from different European countries. They then experimented with adapting them to familiar and acceptable products. Here the problem was to take food, itself more concentrated, tasteless, and characterless than the basic supplies of army rations, and convert it, without expense, into patterned food. For instance, a fish paste, the same fish paste in each case, was used by the Norwegians as a spread for bread, by the Greeks as a cold salad, and by the Yugoslavs as a patty to be fried.

There may well be, however, situations in which the military authorities do not feel it is desirable to attempt to make the food acceptable to local tradition; there may be situations involving mixed groups of refugees, evacuees, imported labor battalions, miscellaneous assortments of peoples of different religions, class, and national background. In such a case the technical problem is reversed. All planning, whether it be for an uncooked ration to be taken home and prepared in households or for mass feeding operations, has to be keyed to an avoidance of foods, food combinations, and methods of preparation which may arouse the active repugnance of *any* of the recipient groups.[6] Instead of making the food distinctively the familiar food of some particular group, it must simply be identifiable, simple, and as conspicuously pure and clean as

[5] Benet, Sula M., and Joffe, Natalie F., "Some Central European food patterns and their relationship to wartime problems of food and nutrition: Polish food patterns," February, 1943; Haskell, Eldora, "Bulgarian food patterns," July, 1943; Joffe, Natalie F., "Background material on Greek food habits," November, 1943; "Some Central European food patterns and their relationship to wartime programs of food and nutrition," January, 1943; "Hungarian food patterns," February, 1943; "Tests of emergency rations with a Norwegian group," May, 1943; Mitchell, Ruth Crawford, "Yugoslav food patterns," August, 1943; Nizzardini, Genoeffa, and Joffe, N. F., "Italian food patterns and their relationship to wartime problems of food and nutrition," August, 1942; Pirkova-Jakobson, Svatava, and Joffe, N. F., "Czech and Slovak food patterns," February, 1943. Washington, D.C.: Committee on Food Habits, National Research Council. Mimeographed.

[6] Committee on Food Habits (National Research Council), "The relationship between food habits and problems of wartime emergency feeding," May, 1942. Mimeographed.

possible. In practice this implies that basic army rations may be better suited for mixed feeding situations of mass homeless groups than would be the more economical concentrated rations composed of dried milk, soya, legumes, etc., which can be developed for relief operations among stable, homogeneous populations.

One of the knotty problems involved in any attempt to regularize the distribution of food in a newly occupied area will be the problem of discrimination—which groups in the population and which local areas are to be given priority for certain types of scarce supplies. A number of criteria are possible. The vulnerable groups which have been recognized at the United Nations Conference on Food and Agriculture at Hot Springs could be given preference; that is, the administration of food relief can be keyed to the ethics of the occupying group.[7] Such standards of discrimination are based on actual physiological urgency, measured nutritionally; first claim would be for young children and pregnant and lactating women. If such standards are used, however, it must be recognized that the procedures which implement them may conflict with local ethics. Even such a simple criterion as weight, by which limited supplies of special foods are reserved for the underweight children, may conflict with a standard of no favoritism among children and run contrary to the ethics of the local community. Or consider the claims of one population group, once well nourished and now feeling deprivation very acutely, versus the food needs of another part of the population, always badly nourished and, though less able to stand up to the ravages of disease, still not suffering as greatly either consciously or actually as the better nourished group. Due consideration to the local ethical standards, the position of children, of the old, of the expectant mothers, of the sick, will increase the cooperativeness of the local population, whereas reference to an ethic based upon the science of nutrition is a possible sanction which can be invoked when the procedures decided upon run counter to the local ethics. Though neither measure will please everyone, both will prevent food distribution which is necessarily discriminatory from seeming arbitrary and therefore cruel.

The British food situation, in which there is almost unanimous approval of and confidence in the government food program, suggests that the most important single factor in providing food for a people under strain is reliability. The food can be dull, it can be meager, it can

[7] Boudreau, Frank G., "The food conference at Hot Springs," *Nutrition Reviews*, 1943, 1, 321-6.

be poor in quality. But if it is always there, if there are no abrupt changes in policy or violent fluctuations in supply, confidence can be developed and maintained. In the initial chaos of a military occupation, such regularity is, of course, a most difficult attainment. All the more important, then, that sporadic high standards which cannot be maintained should not be set. If the food itself, from whatever source, is minimal but reliable, then the methods of distribution and preparation can be used to step up morale or compensate for drops therein. But if the actual food itself has to be used to quell a tendency to riot, or to silence rumors, or to halt panicky evacuations, then no matter how effective such a short-term measure as a sudden release of coffee, tea, or sugar may be, the longer term results will be bad. Alterations in methods of forming queues, proving identity, or establishing need may be equally effective and are much safer.

Another aspect of the problem is the possible need for continuing to feed a civilian population from some staple crop to which they have been reduced by war conditions but which they deeply detest. If potatoes have become the staple, there is every possibility that there will be potatoes available locally and very little else. Even the most sensitive alteration of the social conditions surrounding food will probably fail to mitigate the people's sense of continued hardship. The only recourse of the administrator is to show that he himself recognizes the situation also for just what it is. Admission by any administration that it is fully cognizant of just how unpopular a move is, coupled with some reasonable hope that it is only temporary, is a powerful device for reducing discontent, even in the realm of food.

Finally there is the question of the way in which the local authorities within a country should gradually resume responsibility for the distribution of food through commercial channels and for the organization of relief. It may be assumed that in the cases of friendly occupied countries in which the immediate impact of battle has not been so great as to disrupt local government, the military authorities may be able to leave a great part of the task in the hands of constituted authorities. In other areas where the devastation has been extreme or the local authority has been recruited from fascist groups which are liquidated by the fact of conquest, there may be no constituted authorities whatsoever. The military may then have to take measures to invoke the help of the local populations, instigate the formation of representative committees, etc.

Whichever course is dictated by the circumstances, the whole procedure may well be labelled temporary. The solution of food problems is one which is peculiarly well suited to serve as a focus for democratic civilian action. It is to be hoped that as the process of reconstruction proceeds in every European country, food production and distribution will be consciously used to bring together, around a table, members of all the divergent groups in a community.

But just because this is a desirable goal, it seems all the more imperative that attempts to form permanent organizations should not be initiated during the period of military government. Military government works under an urgency and within a structure which contrasts sharply with the pace and methods of ordinary civilian life. Attempts to integrate civilian leaders into the scheme of military government are bound to strengthen those elements in the community who prefer the speed of authoritarian methods to the slower and more fumbling methods of democracy. So, paradoxical as it may seem, if the various steps in conquest or liberation are to serve, each in its own way, to strengthen the forces of democracy in Europe and to weaken and discredit, in internal affairs as well as on the fighting front, the forces of fascism, the period of military government can best implement this aim by remaining as military as possible.

This may mean not only refraining from setting up any sort of permanent civilian committees to deal with such problems as food and medical care, but also refraining from using democratic methods in specific feeding or food distribution situations. In a refugee or evacuee camp, for example, complaints about food and general unrest can be mitigated by forming committees from among the inmates and letting them assume the responsibility of choice and partial management of the food. This is a process which could, of course, be repeated on a larger scale for a whole community. Resort to such practices will lighten the task of military government at the time, but failure to resort to them may serve as a better way of labelling the military period as abnormal, as an emergency and not a way of life. The more the period is described in this way, the less need there will be to consult local tastes and preferences in matters of food.

If the whole phrasing of the emergency program uses democratic devices it becomes increasingly important that the relief given should be of such character as can be continued on a long-time basis by civilian

agencies. Short-term concessions in food production or food distribution, if incompatible in terms of economics, nutrition, democratic social practice, and the demands of a practical internationalism, need to be carefully avoided. Advisory experts, then, must possess a detailed knowledge of the plans of civilian agencies concerned with whatever relief and reconstruction, agricultural expansion or conversion, is to *follow* the period of military government. This means plans both of international bodies such as United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and the United Nations Interim Commission on Food and Agriculture, and of individual governments.

In summary, a knowledge of the previous conditions of agricultural production, food distribution, and dietary patterns of a country, coupled with intelligent data upon conditions during the war and especially those immediately preceding invasion, are essential to military government if efficient operations, either in accordance with local custom or in opposition to local custom, in accordance with fascist custom or in opposition to it, are to be conducted. To be ignorant of whether a given food is unfamiliar will be much more dangerous than to attempt to introduce such a food knowingly when expedience demands. Knowledge of past food conditions will increase the power of the military government to accomplish its stated immediate aims. Knowledge of the projected future will enable military government to key its own procedures to the longer-term aims for which the war is being fought.