

Famine and Nutrition: The Dutch Hunger Winter 1944/1945

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During the final months of the Second World War, the occupied Netherlands experienced a severe food and fuel shortage in which over 20,000 people died from starvation or the fatal combination of malnutrition, lack of fuel, and infectious diseases. To this day, every Dutchman is familiar with the narrative of this crisis, known as the 'Hunger Winter' of 1944-1945; the eating of sugar beets and tulip bulbs, scavenging the countryside in search of food, queuing outside local soup kitchens, and piles of corpses awaiting burial. The Hunger Winter has been a central topic in the Dutch collective memory of the German occupation since the liberation in 1945, and it became a powerful symbol for the suffering of the Dutch people in the years 1940-1945.

How did a highly developed country such as the Netherlands cope with food shortage and famine? Previous publications have stressed that the partial liberation of the Netherlands in the fall of 1944 caused a breakdown of governmental legitimacy and authority in the still Nazi-occupied areas, which exacerbated the already difficult food position. This paper will argue that, on the contrary, ad hoc policies of senior Dutch bureaucrats played a pivotal role in averting the worst consequences of famine. At the height of the crisis, these Dutch officials made fundamental decisions about further centralizing the rationing system, whilst also delegating important tasks concerning emergency nutrition to local, often non-governmental, organizations. New coalitions that emerged between these Dutch food officials and the German authorities are central to understanding the successes of crisis management during the Hunger Winter.

This paper will first recapitulate the most significant developments in the balance of power between various indigenous and German authorities in the months prior to the Hunger Winter. The second section will focus on the emergency policies and strategies from Dutch and German officials formally responsible for the food supply. In the third and final section the focus will shift to the interaction between the food officials and the public, and the resulting advertised strategies for coping with the famine conditions. By doing so, this paper aims to challenge current perceptions on the decision-making processes during the Dutch Hunger Winter, as well as on the German food policies in the occupied Netherlands at the end of the Second World War.