

The Potato War of 1923 in Germany

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The so-called 'Potato-War' of October 1923 in Germany pictures a very possible scenario of what might await us in the near future - in many places!

After the defeat of the German Empire in World War I, there were shortages everywhere. Especially in the cities there was severe food deprivation. Most of the time, either the shelves in the stores were empty or available goods were highly expensive. Factories went out of business and large parts of the population were unemployed.

In the autumn of 1923, people from the cities travelled in ever larger numbers to the countryside by train to buy food directly from farmers. At first, they were able to pay with sacks of money. Due to runaway inflation, however, the farmers could hardly buy anything with the paper money and city dwellers were forced to exchange their jewelry or precious metals for food. Eventually, farmers became reluctant to sell any food at all since they needed it for themselves.

As prices kept growing and food was becoming more scarce towards winter, relations between village people and city dwellers were rapidly deteriorating. Then, in October of that year, the dispute escalated. In the middle of that month, one sack of potatoes cost one billion marks; ten days later that price was 100 times higher. At the peak of the hyperinflation and a few weeks before the introduction of a new currency, the majority of the population could not accept such prices. At this point buyers turned into looters.

At first, in the early days of October in 1923, city dwellers simply forced the farmers to accept what they were willing to pay, but by the end of the month the invaders simply seized the goods they needed, without paying anything. They rallied with horse carts to steal potatoes and other things in large quantities. Local police was powerless, since requests for reinforcements were rejected. The English occupation forces in Cologne decided it was not their duty, while the French would only help under the condition that the farmers proclaim a 'Rhenish Republic'.

One of the hoarders' routes lead from the city of Cologne to the village of Overath. After the Cologne Railway Authority had organised a special train on that route, the rural population in the region anticipated what was going to happen to them, as thousands of people made their way to the countryside. Thus, the farmers armed themselves for their own protection.

On the morning of October 26th they came to the train station with pitchforks and clubs, awaiting the train from Cologne, which was crammed with people determined to seize food by force. City dwellers broke through the farmers' makeshift barricades as the train station was entirely besieged by looters and the stationmaster was relieved of his duty. Bottles and stones were thrown and the farmers were quickly overrun by the city dwellers. In panic, one of the farmers grabbed a gun and fired into the crowd. One person was instantly killed and a second died in hospital later that day. The gunman was beaten to death and his body was mutilated beyond recognition. After that, the 'visitors' returned to Cologne.

It was quiet the following day, but two days later, driven by hunger, the looters came back. Equipped with pickaxes and carts they cut across the fields and invaded the farmhouses and stables, stealing everything edible they could find or dig up. The locals, outnumbered by the looters and therefore unable to protect their property, could do nothing but stand back in frustration. Back at the station, the major part of the prey was sold to dealers of stolen goods who took them back to the city to resell them.

In response to that raid, the villagers arranged a 1,500-man village militia that took positions along the access roads to the village. Supported by miners, in fear of losing their potato supply, farmers also had the railway station blocked. In early November 1923 the train service from Cologne to Overath was suspended and the city dwellers had to search for food elsewhere. These events of the year 1923 went down in history as 'The Potato War'.

By some miracle, 'only' two people died back then but propensity towards violence was somehow limited in that time. Today organic food production would only feed about one billion people. In other words: only one out of seven of today's world population can be supplied with organic food. Six out of seven would have to starve.

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