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### Life on the German Home Front

When discussing the history of past wars, people often focus on the military aspects: the important battles, the changes in tactics, and the latest technologies. Yet these are just one part of the story. Understanding what life was like on the home front is just as important as understanding what it was like on the front lines. And this importance does not stop at just understanding the American homefront, but that of the enemy. The suffering of German civilians during the great war played a huge role in its outcome, yet is often overlooked when one looks at the war from an American perspective.

My late grandmother was 100% German. Both her mother and father immigrated from Germany, and many of her relatives remain in Deutschland to this day. Her mother and father, Heinrich and Louise Gehrke, were lucky enough to come to America right before WWI (although Heinrich served in the German army in previous years). However, Heinrich's sister Johanne, my great great aunt, remained in Germany. She married a man named Friedrich Kroos, but he died three years later in the trenches while fighting for the Germans.

With her husband off in the trenches, the war was a very difficult time for Johanna. For six years she grieved her husband's death, wearing all black and refusing to go out. She had to support her two sons on her own, but that was not all. The

German government had ordered that all civilians give up their unused rooms to people whose homes had been bombed. As many as 14 extra people came to live with Johanna for years at a time, and she was forced to do much of the cooking since there was only one kitchen.

Johanna's story was not unique, there was immeasurable suffering throughout the German home front. With all the men off at war or already dead, most women were left to support their families on their own. There was a huge shortage of labor, and for the first time in history women were put to work in industry. Even so, they were largely treated very poorly at the workplace. They were forced to work long hours at wages well below their male counterparts, often not making enough to support their families.

Children during the war were forced to grow up fast. Since their mothers were all off working and many of their teachers had been conscripted into the army, school-aged children were left on their own for long periods of time. Many were forced to help support their families and generate revenue.

Of all the suffering German civilians endured, perhaps the most devastating was the lack of food. The allies had set up a naval blockade to cut off Germany from foreign food sources. Unlike the French and British who could import food from places such as America, the Germans were left without any way to feed both their army and civilian population. They were forced to put in place a strict rationing system, declaring certain days "meatless" and "fatless". Most Germans were left surviving on a diet of bread and potatoes, but even these became scarce as the war dragged on. Eventually turnips, a less nutritious vegetable previously kept for livestock, became a staple as potatoes were nowhere to be found.

This food scarcity had become unbearable in urban areas, and began to cause discontentment amongst the civilian population. Many people had become weak and began to die of starvation. A general dislike for farmers began to develop as people believed they were hoarding food for themselves. Starvation was one of the major factors that led Germany to lose moral and want the war to be over, eventually leading to the German revolution and the defeat of Germany in WWI.

In times of war it is easy to dehumanize the enemy. We forget that those we are fighting are generally not bad people, and they are dealing with many struggles of their own. Studying the lives of the enemy is just as important as studying the lives of Americans during wartime. Understanding life on the homefront puts all the battles in context, and can give insights into the motivating factors behind tactical decisions. But most of all, understanding the suffering faced by civilians on both sides of armed conflict helps us realize the true impacts of war, and reminds us to always seek international diplomacy rather than violence.