

## RATIONALISATIONS OF BASIC FOODS IN BUCHAREST DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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**Abstract:** *World War I destroyed the apparently carefree, bohemian world of the Romanian capital. Of all the negative consequences of war the first for the population were lack of money and foodstuffs. Authorities have tried to avoid starvation by ensuring a minimum of food for each and appealed to the German model of rationing of basic products, bread and meat. In this small case study I will briefly present how the rationing process of basic nutrients was implemented in old Bucharest for the years 1916-1918. Interestingly, the process was initiated and maintained by the Romanian authorities and by the Germans after the occupation of the capital by the enemy armies.*

**Keywords:** *card, basic products, war, Bucharest, crisis bread meat, population*

In the modern era, Bucharest was a bohemian city, in progress, offering its residents and foreign visitors a beautiful and patriarchal image. It was not perfect but we can talk about the city as a capital in the west, at least at the level of food diversity and their marketing in different locations.

To complete the picture we can use the information found in the diary of an English woman, who visited in 1915, and pointed out that Bucharest was “a happy little town” where “everybody smiles”, with a “long shopping” street, Victoriei Road, “that stretched from the river, and passed by the palace and two large hotels. A street of joy, a copy of Champs Elisées”, with shops that prided “with unnecessary prohibitive prices.” About food habits she said that “the Romanians love to lay down at lunch, drinking brandy in cafes, lingering, men and women alike, outside the windows”.

Bread and meat, the main foods purchased, were in abundance in Bucharest; prices for all walks of life. Rarely for short periods of time, there were little food crises, caused by a dry year or the merchants’ desire to increase prices. Therefore we can speak about a nearly flawless process of supply and sale of basic nutrients in Bucur’s city.

Bucharest’s bohemian and quiet life was suddenly changed after the occupation of the city by German troops. Daily life was affected in all its aspects, including the segment food establishments. It began by lowering the timetable, continuing with requisitioning and rationalization of products which could be purchased or consumed.

Requisitions and chain rises have put Bucharest in dramatic situations, people unable to buy consumer goods because most foods have disappeared from the market for various reasons. The German troops’ requisitions wiped the city’s population of all reserves. They started with food stores and grocery stores, raising all goods, while leaving requisition vouchers, even in pubs. The Capsa House was turned over to Bulgaria, while restaurants and hotels were converted into houses or casinos officers for soldiers: German campaign kitchens were installed in the Palace courtyard on Victoriei Road; the Bulgarians moved to Capsa - hotel, cafeteria, restaurant. “Ordinances” stuck on walls, soon appeared with all sorts of measures and restrictions. Most were principally aimed at stealing the population’s provisions by imposing on them the obligation to declare poultry, the ban to produce cookies, cakes, candy, preventing the factory from baking rolls and pretzels, the prohibition to cut poultry and other animals, the relementation of working hours for shops, restaurants, cafes etc..

Bucharest’s life is totally changed; people’s old, quiet lives, not worrying about the national economy and “... caring less about less competition in the country”, have changed too. The people ordered lordache’s restaurant for “an idea”, ie brandy, “a cause”, ie a quarter of wine, a “natural”, ie water or “battery” (a mug of wine); they combined them with sausages or patricians (large sausages) and put the country on track, enjoying themselves or trying to do it. They were interested in any change, regardless of their social position,

livelihood and family being the most important; more important than anything (even if some do not recognize this fact) in that tragic moment for the nation. The most radical change was made to basic foods, bread and meat, which came to be marketed based on cards. The card solution was copied from the German model, and applied by enemy troops in 1916. In 1915, the “receipt of delivery” was introduced and everyone was sure that sooner or later it would reach the essentials, too. Numbered tickets were distributed by police sergeants outside office, as would have been easier and more natural for a good compliance record and public order. Traders were not impressed and left their window shops; they emptied their booths, a situation that led to extreme events such as “the showers of blows” from May 28, when all the halls and markets were full only of “threats and curses”. With the introduction of cards, the prices increased exponentially with the population’s panic and the forced requisitioning of all parties.

We learn from reliable sources, and journalists whom we cite, that the bread information cards came first from Berlin; they were “yellow, red, blue and white” and “necessarily provided food for the body for 2 years”. The Germans “have served as a powerful weapon against maritime dominion of England”, helping “faithfully with the English plans for famine”. The amount established by the Ordinance of the “Prussian Ministry of 25 January 1915, which required not to release more bread than was prescribed by a certificate issued by the police, namely in accordance with bread cards”. It was its birthday. Although humiliating, the situation “that damned paper card” was “a proud sign of the will to win” of the German people. Prices were established at once as well as high- phrases which tried to encourage the people of Bucharest who were scared of such an approval and such measures.

Many believed that such a problem could not reach our capital: - “Well, it’s a lie! Cards in our country? The distrustful locals shook their heads. This applied to Germany” alone, they thought, until, once under German occupation, Bucharest was aligned to card systems and proved very good because” the rich and the poor, earned their daily bread, as stated one publicist.

At first the types and quantities to be approved for sale to the population were determined; bread was divided into two categories, white and black; it was to be standard weight of 440 grams and 880 grams respectively and two qualities “one of whole meal flour and one loaf”. White bread should be made only in the bakeries that had special permit issued by City Hall and “only 20% of the amount of flour received”. Prices were fixed in relation to quality and quantity: “black bread 440 gr-15 money, black bread 880 gr-30 money, white bread 440 gr-30 money, white bread 880 gr-60 money”. Reselling prices were: “1 kgr-35 meal money, 1kgr flour for loaf-60 money, corn flour kgr-30 money”. All bakers were forced to manufacture and have bread in both categories and types of grams. Bread could be sold only “with coupon cards for bread” and the sale from carts or bins on the streets was strictly forbidden, for fear of attacks rather than the disturbance” of public order. The

objective was to provide people with basic necessities, therefore, it was stated: “Every baker, after having completed the requirements of institutions, companies, cafeterias popular hotels, restaurants etc.. can stop 20% of its supplies for the public and is allowed to sell them, by itself”, the rest being given to dealers that have officially been enlisted by the Supply Service of the city. The 20% share for merchant use was maintained for its sole discretion, regardless of its status on the city’s market.

The bread card system was kept in 1919 too, when they were issued by the military storehouses; in the meantime they had been militarized because of excessive speculation and lack of marketing of this essential nutrient. Residents were notified by the food distribution program press: “bread will be delivered only at 12 and only until new cards will be issued”.

First on the list of priorities were the, often called “subsistence warehouses”, where they stored food and lists of these products were provided, in quantities and army corps, so that supply to be permanent and plentiful. Despite these concerted efforts, only bread in large quantities were close to the population’s necessities, all other products were reduced to card (rations), many of which worthless papers. Meat was also cartelized. There were plenty of animals but traders preferred to hide goods to sell them with higher prices or to export them to very advantageous prices. By law, much of the livestock had been requisitioned by the Government for military needs and what has remained, was seized by the occupants for their needs. The Germans considered ensuring that nutrient in small amounts, not to deprive the population from a total normal diet. That is why “by trying to supply the capital, the government has introduced the meat cards in the city of Bucharest, with effect from April 9”. Their presence was necessary but the population was suffering “from the available cattle stock depletion caused by Romanian-Russian military requisitions”. We can infer that, it was referred to the smallest details how to obtain and share the meat on the cards. For maximum efficiency the measure was taken from the method in other belligerent countries “to enter the meat-free day”. This has led to the prohibition of the sale of food products and meat on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, even when merchants could deal with orders. As punishment for those who had the courage to violate the ordinances, fines and imprisonment were set out, and in special cases the two sentences could be combined into one. Although they were found very hard, foods did not disappear completely from the Bucharest market, but prices had become unbearable for most people with low incomes or below the poverty line. At the booths, the butcher shops and stands first necessity products were very expensive and all complained of the situation, without this being reflected sufficiently in the public documents. Doctor Marta Rainer Trancu wrote in her diary on 23 December 1916: “we do not have meat at all. And that’s 5 lei kg. Lard reached 10 lei. ... A goose 15 to 20 lei and 25 lei a turkey”. The same excessive

costs and nothing like those in the table based on official figures were seized by Constantin Bacalbaşa: prices are very high at Ciobanu’s grocery store, too, where a Kgr. Of Butter costs 16 lei. (Today 50). Greek cheese – 16 lei, (Today 40-50), Ham 16 lei kgr, (Today they 60). Loaf comes on January 15 to 65 money, chicken costs 10 lei, (Today 40), turkey 30 lei (120 - 150), eggs 35 to 40 money. With great difficulty 4 could be obtained for 1 leu, (Today 1 leu and 50 to 2.50)”. Despite these failures, people loved their capital city, enjoyed a night out, every meal and good wine with friends, and when they were away from their corner of heaven they went missing it. This longing for Bucharest, maybe a little exaggerated can be illustrated by rendering a small portion of the country wanderings of a journalist in 1917 during the First World War. In one of his visits, he was stopped by a friend in Iasi, to tell him about Bucharest. He explained his gesture by longing for the town, showing surprisingly, “dry as a raisin-salt troubled” and at the natural question of the journalist on the grounds that have brought him in a deplorable state he responded in one gulp, “Bucharest, Bucharest uncle! It made me like that. Longing for Bucharest, it destroys me ... Do you think it’s a small thing, I not to see Calea Victoriei for a year! ... Not to have my endeavours with women, at the Royal Villa, means less work to you! ... Then have a pint of beer, at *Carul cu Bere*. Yes, the terrace or *High Life!* ... The renowned sausages, not to mention ... I’ve forgotten the taste ... He spoke with a voice choked as if they had mentioned the death of a sibling, or loss of a beloved woman. .... I miss Bucharest to death”.

He did not know, poor him, that they were only the memory of Bucharest. At end of the war the situation didn’t quickly return to normal, and from the old rich menus with local and foreign varieties, it remained a list that included: cabbage, stew, potatoes, steak, bread, pies, coffee, wine, beer and that’s all. Costs jumped the threshold of any imagination. In 1919, according to a report received the prices paid at a “restaurant downtown” for a menu more than modest in all respects, in variety and quantity, which included the following: “2 cabbage rolls, 7 lei, a portion of stew 7 lei: the oriental potatoes (a potato and a half), 6 lei, macaroni, 7 lei, a quarter chicken fried, 10 lei, 2 potato balls, 7 lei, bread, 1 leu, tip 2 lei”, so in total 56 and 28 lei per person just lunch money. Large prices and inflation for the period of 1900-1916, when a meal cost 10 lei at Capsa, the most expensive and the finest local.

The feeling of belonging to this city is to be found at all those who mention it, from hearsay or from experience; it always appears as an idyllic image of these beautiful gardens where life stood still and seemed to dominate the bohemian atmosphere day and night. Summer gardens in the center of the road districts and offering evening entertainment to people, wine, cold beer, sausages and steaks. Pubs, restaurants, coffee shops and cafes a patriarchal world, a world of peace, with all its problems-ended and another era began. For a short time, Bucharest relived those moments when it was called “Little Paris”; the rest is history.

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