

Britain's Kitchen Front:
British perceptions of the food situation and women's attitudes during the Second World War
(February 1942)

Marissa Nicole Millhorn
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

Senior Project
Dr. Kathleen Murphy
History Department
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Introduction

In May and June of 1940, numerous housewives scrounged together food rations, using new food items such as spam and dried eggs, as part of a national effort to rescue hundreds of thousands of British and French soldiers. They helped their husbands prepare to join a haphazard fleet of boats set to sail the English Channel and rescue the helpless soldiers stranded on the beaches of Dunkirk. The civilian population seemingly came together in the “Miracle of Dunkirk.”¹

The British experience of the Second World War is often portrayed as exhibiting this sense of solidarity; a “people’s war,” in which the entire population fought together in a front that transcended the trenches and reached into civilians’ homes. Indeed, war touched every aspect of ordinary life, as bombs destroyed families and homes, children were sent away to the countryside, and women were expected to take an active role in the fight against the Nazis. Thousands of women who had not previously considered employment became industrial workers and joined various wartime organizations.²

Despite this massive transformation in the lives of women, the majority, approximately 8.75 million, were full-time housewives who were expected to take care of their children and their home, which included providing food for their families.³ Often in Britain’s collective memory there is a tendency to overlook the role housewives played in the war effort. It is easy to emphasize the massive transformation that took place in the British workforce as women voluntarily earned wages and others were conscripted to join the war effort. However, behind the scenes housewives played a key role in Britain’s campaign, and more accurately represent a

¹ Angus Calder, *The People’s War: Britain 1939-1945* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), 108-110.

² H.M.D. Parker, *Manpower: A Study of War-time Policy and Administration* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1957), 286.

³ Harold L. Smith, “The Effect of War on the Status of Women,” in *War and Social Change: British Society in the Second World War*, ed. Harold L. Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 102-103.

majority of women's contribution. Women, such as those who provided food for the fishermen of Dunkirk, similarly helped fight for their country. One advertisement during the war clarified this responsibility declaring, "The British Housewife is helping to make a second front—the Kitchen Front—against Hitler."⁴ British women fought food scarcity and managing their home in their own kitchen front.

During the war, shopping and cooking intensified as the British government employed flat-rate and point-based rationing on food items. These rationing schemes continually increased and evolved during the span of the war. Wartime food preparation also involved intensive planning with strategic shopping in order to prepare one meager dinner. Furthermore, while the British government attempted to ensure nutritious food, it was unable to provide continuity regarding the types of food or variety. This made life especially difficult for housewives, and all Britons who maintained the home front.

To combat anticipated low morale regarding food consumption, the British government employed propaganda aimed primarily at women. This propaganda stressed women's responsibility for their family's survival through prudent and efficient consumption, all while promoting fair shares of food and "equality of sacrifice."⁵ However, the reality of rationing proved vastly different than what the government publicized, and people did not receive equal amounts or the same variety of food. Despite the extra burdens and sometimes blatant inequality, a national campaign aimed to convince women it was their kitchen front duty to maintain a stability of everyday life, in order to keep up everyone's morale during the trying wartime

⁴ Richard Farmer, *The Food Companions: Cinema and Consumption in Wartime Britain, 1939-45* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2011), 22-23.

⁵ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, "Fair Shares? The Limits of Food Policy in Britain during the Second World War," In *Food and War in Twentieth Century Europe*, ed. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska et al. (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011), 125.

conditions.⁶ As rationing and the overall food situation in Britain during the war affected the entire populace, especially women, on such a large scale, this paper explores how male and female Britons viewed rationing and women's attitude towards it. Through a close analysis of Mass Observation responses, I argue that while both men and women largely embraced an optimistic outlook to cope with the hardships of rationing, perceptions of the food situation and women's attitude towards it were gendered. Although a majority of men described the food situation in positive terms, others meticulously listed absent foods and meager rationed goods, acknowledged complaints, and admitted to participating in illegal rationing activities. In contrast, women internalized their duty to maintain morale, so that any food grouches, acknowledged or not, could only be defined in terms of inequality.

Mass Observation provides a unique window into the social lives of British men and women during the Second World War; it offers a glimpse of thoughts and perceptions that otherwise might never have been recorded. It was a social research project created by anthropologist Tom Harrisson and journalist Charles Madge in 1937 to create an anthropology or science "of ourselves," by studying the everyday lives of ordinary people in Great Britain. Mass Observation researchers requested that volunteers send directives (open-ended sets of questions), diaries, and day surveys, along with other observations, so that researchers could record the personal lives and opinions of men and women from every class in Britain. Researchers hoped that specific directives could produce relatively accurate accounts of social practices, events or beliefs that the researchers could quantify and use for studies.⁷

⁶ Gillian Swanson, "So much money and so little to spend it on': morale, consumption and sexuality," in *Nationising Fertility: Culture, sexuality and British cinema in the Second World War*, ed. Christine Gledhill et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 77-78.

⁷ "The Original Mass Observation," Mass Observation: Recording everyday life in Great Britain, accessed October 8, 2012, http://www.massobs.org.uk/original_massobservation_project.htm.

In February of 1942, one such directive survey asked Mass Observation respondents to “Describe the food situation and women’s attitude towards it.” This directive and the voluntary and anonymous responses to the statement constitute the focus of my research. My analysis of both men and women’s opinions on the food situation and, in particular, women’s attitude towards it, helps us better understand how Britons generally coped with wartime rationing. Despite the anonymity of the Mass Observation directive, which does not guarantee objectivity even though the respondents were not accountable for their words, it is difficult to ascertain how civilians actually perceived rationing due to their own biases or frames of mind. For instance, there is the tendency to exaggerate to illustrate a point, instead of providing the more complicated actuality. Nevertheless, I hope that by framing the February 1942 directive responses in their proper historical context, my research reveals important insight into British civilians’ feelings about rationing and women’s role in the kitchen front.

Several social historians have relied upon the Mass Observation archive as a means to discover popular opinion, most frequently regarding the Second World War. However, historians primarily use the data from directive responses to convey general opinions or trends, or focus their research entirely on particular diarists and their experiences of war.⁸ Furthermore, while there seems to be a fair amount of literature on rationing during the war, as well as its effects on women and the home front, few scholars concentrate on the public’s perception of rationing and how Britons believed the food situation impacted the lives of women. By using the Mass Observation February 1942 directive as my focus, I show that detailed responses provide insight into the opinions of a variety of different people who experienced food rationing according to

⁸ A few examples include James Hinton’s *Nine Wartime Lives: Mass-Observation and the Making of the Modern Self*, numerous works by Simon Garfield and *The Diaries of Nella Last: Writing in War and Peace*, ed. Patricia and Robert Malcomson.

their gender, class, occupation and a variety of other factors that other simple surveys cannot generate.

Perhaps one of the most comprehensive assessments of British rationing is Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska's study of food policy during World War II and the years following. She explores governmental policy, consumption, gender and the relationship between British society and the state. Zweiniger-Bargielowska argues that rationing was not a straightforward response to scarcity, but that such controls contributed to external and internal economic policy objectives that after the war became associated with a distinct ideological perspective.⁹ In another work, Zweiniger-Bargielowska highlights the shortcomings of food policy during the war, such as the discrepancy between government propaganda that claimed fair shares for all, and the social inequities that were not leveled out by flat-rate rationing schemes.¹⁰ My paper relies on her work regarding the impact of rationing on women, as she examines the gendered implications of austerity. In *Austerity in Britain*, Zweiniger-Bargielowska emphasizes housewifery and motherhood's increased importance and vital role in public health and morale maintenance. My work concludes that the female directive respondents, mostly housewives, accepted morale maintenance as an obligation or wartime duty.

Another historian, Richard Farmer, specifically focuses on food consumption and its effect on British popular culture during the war. In *The Food Companion*, he explores the way food was used in propaganda, especially commercial film, to shape the national and individual experience of the war. Farmer maintains that in wartime culture, rationing, food control, coupons, points and queues all combined to make food materially, culturally and psychologically

⁹ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939-1955*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, "Fair Shares? The Limits of Food Policy in Britain during the Second World War," In *Food and War in Twentieth Century Europe*, ed. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska et al. (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011).

paramount.¹¹ Although the core of his work is on food in wartime cinema, Farmer also examines the Ministry of Food's publicity primarily aimed at housewives during the war. I also demonstrate the importance and impact of food, especially in women's daily lives.

Assorted social histories focus on women's role during the war, and their relationship to consumption. Gillian Swanson examines the relationship between femininity and the newly modernized British national character altered by war. She maintains that questions of women's morale, their dedication to the war effort and participation in the nation's future became fundamentally connected with the war's influence on their sexual behavior.¹² Along with Zweiniger-Bargielowska, Swanson's analysis on women's duty to keep up morale through "selflessness" in regards to consumption serves as a main framework for my argument. However, my paper specifically focuses on food consumption, contrasting men and women's opinions of the wartime diet and its affect on women's attitudes.

These histories all piece together an idea of rationing and Britain's kitchen front, not as a united group of people working together, dedicated to promoting equal shares for everyone, but as a complex system that placed uneven burdens on people according to gender and class. It would seem the men and women who responded to the February directive would similarly not have uniform opinions regarding the food situation and women's attitude towards it. However, the language they used signified a rather consistent positive outlook towards rationing, and most interestingly, women seemed to not directly complain about the system, but rather the people who violated the propagandized notion of equality. This paper addresses how and why men and

¹¹ Richard Farmer, *The Food Companions: Cinema and Consumption in Wartime Britain, 1939-45* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2011).

¹² Gillian, Swanson, "So Much Money and So Little to Spend It On: Morale, Consumption and Sexuality," In *Nationalising Femininity*, ed. Christine Gledhill et al. (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996).

women responded differently to the February 1942 Mass Observation directive about rationing and women's attitude towards it.

"A science of ourselves: What was Mass Observation?"

In the late 1930s, two men, one anthropologist and the other a reporter, joined forces to begin a social research project to develop what they called a "science of ourselves." Subsequently, Tom Harrisson and Charles Madge established an organization called Mass Observation, with an objective and methodology entirely new, compared to previous social research projects. While most surveys concentrated on statistical samplings of social conditions such as health, employment and housing, Harrisson and Madge sought to gain knowledge about what people thought and felt. The organization of Mass Observation intended to discover not only the "facts," but also what people did or said to "add to the social consciousness of the time."¹³

In order to discover the "science of ourselves," Mass Observation researchers sought to approach British society just like other anthropological studies and relied on observation along with volunteer questionnaires. The first study concentrated on a single event, the coronation of George VI on May 12, 1937 to discover what the event meant to "ordinary people." A group of volunteers wrote down everything they did on that day, as a "day survey," and another group of general observers recorded what they saw and heard that day.¹⁴ Along with sending monthly "directives," consisting of a list of questions volunteers were supposed to answer, these approaches became the core of Mass Observation's research methodology that they expanded to recording everyday life in Great Britain.

¹³ Penny Summerfield, "Mass Observation: Social Research or Social Movement?" *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 20, No. 3 (1985): 439-440.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 440.

The Second World War, however, would fundamentally change the organization as the Ministry of Information employed Mass Observation in the spring of 1940 to send in “morale reports.” Charles Madge maintained that Mass Observation’s intention had been to stand as an independent critic of the government and objected to contributing to wartime propaganda. As a result he left the organization, and while during the war Mass Observation had the best years in terms of frequency of responses from its panelists, the organization shifted to essentially market research with its publications. Instead of bringing the social reality experienced by ordinary people to the attention of national leaders, Mass Observation’s information would offer guidance on how to wield power more effectively.¹⁵ The organization’s publications came under attack from academia and although they relied on more statistics and published interesting pieces, in 1949 it largely disintegrated. Harrison eventually exchanged his rights to the organization for all the Mass Observation material prior to 1949 and donated the boxes of material to the University of Sussex. He claimed that more than ninety percent of it was never used in the compilation of reports and publications.¹⁶

As the organization largely failed in its objective as a social movement, but uncovered important social research, it is important to examine the values and limits to using Mass Observation. As my research relies on the voluntary directive respondents, of course gaining a representative account proves problematic. Even while Mass Observation had its largest participation in 1942, during the entire period of 1937 to 1945 only 2, 847 volunteers replied to at least one directive, and only half continued replying.¹⁷ Furthermore, the voluntary nature of the directives excludes Britons who did not know about the organization and limits objectivity. Mass Observation directive respondents, as a sampling for the British population is inherently

¹⁵ Ibid., 446-448.

¹⁶ Ibid., 448-451.

¹⁷ Ibid., 441.

unrepresentative. However, one of the original objectives of Mass Observation was to ascertain thoughts and feelings, which are subjective in their nature.

To engage in this idea that the individuals who responded to the directives are biased helps to provide context for this essay. When I delved into the online Mass Observation archive, I attempted to find a relatively equal number of male and female respondents who responded to the one February directive from 1942 that asked people to “Describe the food situation and women’s attitude towards it.” I randomly selected and examined a group of 104 men and 97 women, anticipating a gendered study. In response to the premise that the participants themselves are biased, I concluded an analysis of the directive responses would be a rather subjective process. The respondent’s diction and descriptions are not quantifiable, and thus this paper only relies on two statistics that categorize both male and female respondent’s perceptions as positive or negative. Instead, by exploring patterns amongst the different genders this paper analyzes individual expressions that correspond to the preexisting patterns. This process provides insight into typical responses, which reveal general feelings or opinions.

It is also important to examine who these Mass Observation respondents were and why they may have contributed to the organization. Historian Penny Summerfield describes typical occupations of male respondents as clerks, schoolteachers, shopkeepers, journalists, scientists, students, and during the war, many joined the forces. A substantial minority of men also worked as manual laborers in the manufacturing industry. Women also were employed as clerks and schoolteachers; however, the vast majority classified themselves as housewives, though they may have been employed prior to marriage.¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, probably due to time constraints, women with small children from every class proved to be the minority. Numerous respondents belonged to the lower middle class and middle class, but there were a limited number of working

¹⁸ Ibid., 442.

class individuals as well. The leaders of Mass Observation referred to their volunteers as “men and women of goodwill” as they not only provided their services free of charge, but contributed knowledge for the goodwill or benefit of society as well.¹⁹ Why did volunteers take the time to write detailed responses to various random directive questions during wartime? Summerfield identifies that the invitation to send in intimate thoughts and feelings along with information around them must have given individuals the sense of being listened to; a voice, to express their opinions, big or small. Which may have been especially important for women, since while they had the ability to vote, they largely had no role in traditional party politics and trade union organization.²⁰

Overall the Mass Observation participants function as a varied group of men and women from different classes and occupations. While the directive respondents are not a representative sample of citizens from Great Britain, notably excluding the upper classes and a large group of mothers with young children, their thoughts and feeling still contribute to different outlooks on wartime life. The Mass Observation directives provide a rich source of individual opinions and insights that represent large trends amongst individuals of the same gender.

The Kitchen Front: Rationing and British women in World War II

At the onset of war in September of 1939, the British government established the second wartime Ministry of Food and rationing began in January of 1940. Ration books were distributed and Britons were told to register with shops for bacon, ham, butter and sugar. Meat soon followed and by 1941, tea, margarine, cooking fats, preserves and cheese had at different times

¹⁹ Ibid., 443.

²⁰ Ibid., 442.

been added to the list of straight rationed goods.²¹ Throughout the war, bread and potatoes were never rationed and for significant amount of time restaurants or canteen meals did not require coupons. Along with providing a “buffer” for differential energy requirements among citizens, to account for some people needing more food than others, the ministry hoped to not overwhelm the public. By keeping basic non-rationed foods, the ministry gave the British public a semblance of control.²²

However, growing food shortages during the winter of 1940 to 1941 led to the emergence of a different approach to rationing: points rationing. Under points rationing, consumers did not have to register at shops and could choose what food to spend their points on. This scheme proved to be very popular, as rations increased and expanded to more luxury items. In 1942, rationed and controlled foods accounted for more than half of the total food expenditure.²³ The Ministry of Food managed to practically appease the British public as they provided options while still maintaining control of consumption. While Britain’s pre-war food policy planning had centered around the public’s perceived successes of the first war and flat-rate rationing, during the war, the Ministry of Food was required to make a departure.²⁴

While wartime food policy focused on anti-inflationary policies and the reduction of imports, the Ministry of Food found nutrition equally important. Several campaigns focused on digging for victory gardens, which not only provided a way for civilians to contribute to the war food effort by growing vegetables and selling excess, but also making sure the general public knew the importance of the vitamins in vegetables. Propaganda, such as the cartoon “Dr. Carrot,” encouraged children to eat their homegrown vegetables, while housewives were given

²¹ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain*, 18.

²² Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, “Fair Shares? The Limits of Food Policy, 126.

²³ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain*, 31.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

instructions on how to cook them without destroying vitamin content.²⁵ In 1942, the National Loaf, comprised of wholemeal bread, became the only bread available and added extra nutrients to the un-rationed staple. Despite its unpopularity compared to white bread, its high iron and vitamin B greatly improved the nutrition and diet of the whole nation, especially the working class.²⁶ The government used food limitations and the necessity of home growing fruits and vegetables to educate and improve vitamin intake among the British populace.

Food control and these measures all contributed to a “diet revolution” in regards to social class, as for the first time ever income differences in protein and fat consumption were effectively eroded and the gap in vitamin and mineral intake also disappeared.²⁷ Furthermore, the British government created special allowances and ration books for certain groups, such as manual workers and children and pregnant women who constituted most of the welfare foods scheme.²⁸ To help address problems of poverty-related malnutrition, these specially colored ration books allowed for pregnant and nursing mothers along with children under the age of one to get extra milk rations at reduced prices. Small children were given an allowance of blackcurrant juice (later American lend-lease orange juice) and cod liver oil for extra vitamin intake.²⁹ The Ministry of Food aimed to improve health despite wartime conditions.

Along with promoting health, the Ministry of Food relied on a massive propaganda scheme to promote food and consumption as central elements of British wartime life. Their primary aim was to create a “food conscious” nation, in the hopes of combating ill feelings towards wartime regulation of food.³⁰ Thousands of advertisements through various media and

²⁵ Lizzie Collingham, *The Taste of War: World War II and the Battle for Food*, (London: Allen Lane, 2011), 390.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 389

²⁷ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain*, 44.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 58

²⁹ Lizzie Collingham, *The Taste of War*, 396.

³⁰ Richard Farmer, *The Food Companions*, 20.

popular culture, including cartoons, newspapers and commercial films frequently featured food imagery to promote the idea of a “food-based community.” Ministry of Food slogans insisted that food was a “munition of war” and the widespread nature of these campaigns were intended to cultivate a collective attitude regarding consumption.³¹ This propaganda scheme recognized that along with information, the British public needed publicity about food from a psychological nature.

The Ministry of Food emphasized communality and equality in their early campaigns to promote acceptance of food control. Advertisement themes stressed that British rationing focused on equality of distribution and equality of sacrifice, rather than solely to combat food shortages.³² Lord Woolton, the relatively popular Minister of Food, appealed directly to consumers and elevated the crucial role citizens maintained as warriors on the “kitchen front.”³³ Broadcasts encouraged individuals to identify their daily hardships with the wider national effort and understand that the problems they faced were not unique. That rationing and food shortages affected everyone and all Britons needed to adapt to the wartime circumstance.³⁴ Consequently, home front propaganda emphasized the need for “effort, suffering [and] sacrifice” to be accepted “willingly and proudly” for the nation.³⁵ The British government promised to provide equality with the rationing and control of food, with the similar expectation of equality of sacrifice amongst the people.

In spite of the wartime food scheme’s emphasis on equality and nutritional requirements, several inequalities persisted among people of different social classes, gender and living situations. As most of the food control functioned as a flat-rate system, disparities existed in

³¹ Ibid., 21, 61.

³² Ibid., 33.

³³ Ibid., 22-23.

³⁴ Ibid., 43.

³⁵ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain*, 60.

regards to un-rationed foods and access to restaurants. Due to the fact that restaurant meals were not rationed, wealthy citizens could escape rationing restrictions by not having to surrender any ration coupons for their meals. Not only did they not have to worry about inflating prices on un-rationed goods, but also this ability to eat out provided a variety in meals that a majority of the public lacked. Furthermore, the black market provided ways to circumvent the wartime legislation and gain access to the desired tea, eggs, and meat that those with low incomes could not afford. This inequality directly challenged the sense of communal solidarity that “fair shares for all” propaganda attempted to instill, however, this wartime spirit failed to end some citizen’s sense of entitlement.³⁶ The opportunity to grow vegetables and keep poultry was also not equally available to everyone, as city dwellers lacked the land and conscripted factory workers did not have as much time for individual farming.³⁷ Unfortunately, the British government could not control all aspects of food consumption, but attempted to keep spirits up in the trying wartime conditions.

Inequalities were not limited to wealth and location, as a citizen’s gender also affected the distribution of food in families. While rations were allocated on an individual basis, consumption occurred at the household level and it is strongly believed that many wives and mothers gave some of their rations to their husbands and children. British culture at the time valued the breadwinner’s health, while subsequently women felt that self-sacrifice was their contribution to the war effort.³⁸ Although Ministry of Food propaganda about rationing aimed to cultivate admiration for their food schemes by providing the whole country with ubiquitous food information, their primary targets were women and housewives.³⁹ As this paper explores later,

³⁶ Richard Farmer, *The Food Companions*, 152.

³⁷ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, “Fair Shares? The Limits of Food Policy, 130-131.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 128-129.

³⁹ Richard Farmer, *The Food Companions*, 22.

this self-sacrificing attitude characterized women's association with rationing and food during the war.

At the beginning of the war, Lord Woolton declared, "Food control is really a woman's affair, and that's why I talk to women in these broadcasts."⁴⁰ Ministry of Food propaganda was primarily intended for women. While those who sold food and orchestrated rationing policy were men, advertisements and programs targeted housewives as the assumed audience who queued for, purchased and prepared food. Although some of the propaganda might have been considered patronizing by housewives, especially those who had successfully managed their family's food without state intervention, the government intended to ease the fears of many women.⁴¹ As during the early 1940s, women, especially housewives, worried more about food and other shortages than men.⁴² This inundation of official propaganda sought to raise housewives' awareness of the significance of their work; most importantly, their maintenance of family health and morale.⁴³ One advertisement in magazines, "Food Facts," specifically addressed a female readership and emphasized housewives vital role as cooks in the war effort to both women and those they fed.⁴⁴ One of the most important radio campaigns of the war (as it was right after the news bulletin), a five minute broadcast called *The Kitchen Front*, also addressed women and aired six days a week in the morning. The short talks intended to "reach the housewife before she sets out on her morning's shopping and plans meals for the day."⁴⁵ The Ministry of Food actively sought to influence women and housewives' decisions for the day and its programs and advertisements functioned as constant reminders of their responsibility; women's kitchen front

⁴⁰ Ibid., 22-23.

⁴¹ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain*, 48.

⁴² Ibid., 63.

⁴³ Ibid., 109.

⁴⁴ Richard Farmer, *The Food Companions*, 22-23.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 39.

duty to make the difficulties of wartime food ordinary for their families. Propaganda aimed directly at women had a direct impact on how women perceived rationing and their roles towards it.

Women's perceptions of the food situation

Despite the fact rationing placed the largest burden on women, most female respondents to the Mass Observation directive described the food situation optimistically and addressed inequalities not as complaints, but as women failing in their wartime duties to their country. While women experienced and coped with rationing in different ways, in general, women found it easier to complain indirectly by sharing others' grouses, or focusing on the positive aspects of rationing. Overly thankful women who described Great Britain's food situation as fortunate compared to the rest of Europe outweighed the few women who actually complained.

A significant majority of women began their directive responses with statements about how satisfied they were with the food situation and the rationing scheme. Most women praised the system using phrases in the beginning of their responses such as "quite good," "fairly cheerful," and "easy" to describe the food situation.⁴⁶ Very few women used negative words to initially describe their feelings, as approximately 80 out of 97 female respondents, instead chose to highlight their support of the rationing system. One woman from Chester, England, credits rationing to the variety of food, and remarks "it is very fair and results in the available foodstuffs being distributed evenly."⁴⁷ Despite the fact the reality of rationing was quite different, as food availability depended on numerous factors mostly in relation to wealth, she chooses to commend the system not only for its variety, but also for its equality. In their responses women tended to

⁴⁶ DR 3022, DR 2978, DR 2889, "Reply to February 1942 Directive," from *Mass Observation Online: British Social History, 1937-1972, from the University of Sussex*, Adam Matthew Digital, 2012.

⁴⁷ DR 1040, "Reply to February 1942 Directive."

focus on the success of rationing, recognizing the government's responsibility to provide "fair shares for all."

Along with generally praising the system, most of the women considered themselves and others in Britain very fortunate. However, they also disguised grouches with feelings of thankfulness, communicating food difficulties without directly grumbling. For instance, one female respondent remarks that the food situation is pretty good compared to the "semi-starvation" in some countries and is thankful even when she sometimes receives a precious egg that is black or green.⁴⁸ Instead of directly complaining that sometimes she receives bad eggs, when the ration was strictly one fresh egg a week, she instead focuses on the other countries in Europe that are not guaranteed rations at all. She makes the comment about eggs almost as if an afterthought after listing some of the items that they are now able to receive and not have to worry about queuing. She rationalizes that she is lucky to have a healthy and varied diet at all. Another woman, presumably a student from Cambridge, admits she does not have to do the shopping herself and considers herself not only fortunate, but also guilty because occasionally she is mailed "hagus" from her family in Scotland.⁴⁹ She experiences guilt at not participating in the "equality of sacrifice" and taking more than her share of rations. Despite the fact that she does not directly engage in any of the responsibilities of procuring the extra food or preparing the food, just the knowledge that she receives more than her fellow citizens upsets her. Furthermore, being a woman, her wartime mentality is guided by the need for altruism and the extras she receives produces internal conflict. Another female respondent who has very strong opinions regarding rationing, describes the hundreds of starving people in Greece that she has read about. She maintains that everyone "should be made to realize we are far better off than many places in

⁴⁸ DR 1329, "Reply to February 1942 Directive."

⁴⁹ DR 2863, "Reply to February 1942 Directive."

Europe, and are indeed lucky to not be starving like they are.”⁵⁰ She takes an active stance in her responsibility to maintain morale, arguing that more can be done to make British citizens understand the importance of rationing. Directive respondents who were women emphasized their fortunate circumstances instead of focusing on the negative aspects of the rationing system, keeping with their duty to maintain morale.

Various women went further in their opinion of the food situation, declaring that rations could be decreased. One woman from the heavily bombed city of Coventry finds that women are “contented” and that “we can healthily carry on indefinitely on what we now get, or even much less.”⁵¹ Not only does the respondent compliment the success of rationing by explaining its health, but also she concludes that if necessary that rations could be decreased. Fully taking on the mentality that the Ministry of Food hoped to instill in housewives, she embraces a selfless attitude towards the war effort. The same woman from Chester who praised the equality and efficiency of the rationing scheme also states, “In fact I, and many of my acquaintances feel that there could well be further cuts in the supply of luxury foods and much more shipping space and labour in this country saved.”⁵² This female respondent also embraces her national duty and agrees that even more can be done on the kitchen front. British women and housewives attempted to ignore the inconveniences of rationing, and instead focused on what more they could do as their contribution to the war effort.

Along with praising rationing, women were gratified in regards to their own contribution to the rationing system and involvement in the war effort. One respondent who describes herself as being “her own mistress,” maintains that she takes “pride in keeping strictly to my rations, and making do with this or that which may be available while on season.” She boasts that while she

⁵⁰ DR 1040, “Reply to February 1942 Directive.”

⁵¹ DR 1078, “Reply to February 1942 Directive.”

⁵² DR 3017, “Reply to February 1942 Directive.”

maintains a friendship with a grocer a few doors down, that she has never asked or received any favors.⁵³ When describing how she feels about the food situation, this independent woman's ideas directly resemble rationing propaganda. She emphasizes her contribution in the kitchen front, as she ensures fair shares for all by her strict adherence to the food scheme. Indeed, she demonstrates her ability to gain a grocer's favor, but takes pride in her refusal to ask for any extra benefits at all. Most female respondents perceived the wartime "food situation" according to equality propaganda and took pride in their participation.

Not all female respondents cheerfully accepted the system without any complaints, however, women only addressed problems with rationing regarding the failure to adhere to the "equality of sacrifice" expected of British citizens. One female respondent mentions that some unpatriotic residents actually contribute to the necessity of rationing. For instance, she mentions if there are rumors of certain goods that are to be rationed, people stock up in order to be able to have more than their ration, which ultimately causes a shortage and the need for rationing.⁵⁴ While this woman is initially very positive about the benefits to the rationing system she also takes notice of its failures in regards to British citizens. She mentions the unfair nature of restaurants as people are able to get more than their ration, and about a certain factory that gives extra pints of milk to its female workers.⁵⁵ The respondent is optimistic about most of the successes of rationing and her complaints are about the people who contribute to inequality or are unable to do their part in the war effort.

Along with relaying grievances in relation to inequality, some women expressed that some of the rationing problems were related to men. One respondent illustrates, "But husbands are the cause of most of the trouble. The selfishness of the huge majority surpasses belief. The

⁵³ DR 1075, "Reply to February 1942 Directive."

⁵⁴ DR 2974, "Reply to February 1942 Directive."

⁵⁵ Ibid.

wives are harried to death searching for food for husbands who still demand the best of everything... [take] most of the sugar ration—and turn their noses up at the margarine.” She even describes their actions as “criminal.”⁵⁶ Despite having stated that women “welcome” rationing, she portrays the devastating effect it had on housewives who did not have supportive husbands. She lists grievances from rationing, but cannot relate it to the system itself. Instead, the selfishness of husbands is pitted against the selflessness of wives as the source of rationing conflict. Another respondent mentions the problem that wives face when packing mid-day lunches as their husbands complain when there is not enough meat in their sandwiches. She mentions, “The British working-man does not like the crated carrot kind of substitute!”⁵⁷ Both of these women are committed to understanding rationing as ordinary life, as complaining would have undermined the kitchen front morale that housewives needed to uphold. However, communicating the lack of variety of food and discontent through other men and even other women, effectively eliminated the need for women to directly complain and lose their control, their coping mechanism. Some women maintained that men have not realized what “rationing means:” embodying a sense of fortune and maintaining optimism throughout for the sake of the home.

While women experienced and handled the burdens of rationing in different ways, most women focused on the positives aspects and tried to maintain optimism on the kitchen front. They regarded complaints as justified criticisms of people failing to uphold their wartime responsibilities and standards of fair shares for all. Overall, women expressed satisfaction with the current food situation in Britain and avoided discussion of food items they missed, in favor of expressing gratitude for having enough food at all.

⁵⁶ DR 2903, “Reply to February 1942 Directive.”

⁵⁷ DR 3015, “Reply to February 1942 Directive.”

Men's Perceptions of the food situation

A considerable amount of male Mass Observation respondents omitted the section about the food situation in the February directive. When men actually responded to the directive about the food situation in Britain, they found it easier to discuss the problematic aspects of rationing. However, while men were more likely to mention negative characteristics, similar to women, they also approved of rationing overall; 78 out of 104 male respondents had positive descriptions. Nevertheless, men did not perceive rationing as a self-sacrificing responsibility and had fewer difficulties complaining or even denouncing the rationing system. They were more apt to describe the difficulties women faced when shopping or cooking, despite their optimistic descriptions overall. More often, male respondents focused on lists of specific foods that were obtainable and unobtainable in their towns. Instead of emphasizing equality, the scarcity of meat in their diets and lack of variety in meals concerned British men.

The most discernible differences between male responses and ones written by British women concern the troubling aspects of the rationing system, in which some men solely concentrate on its failures. One respondent describes the irregularity of his meals and maintains, “We are on the whole exceptionally—though perhaps monstrously fed.”⁵⁸ Along with listing the foods missing from his diet, he concludes his assessment in such a pessimistic manner. Unlike female respondents and a majority of male respondents, he does not eventually rationalize his complaints, but stays negative throughout his assessment of the system. As food propaganda did not specifically target male individuals, who typically did not prepare or shop for their own meals, it is possible he had fewer qualms about failing to participate in the “equality of sacrifice.” Another male respondent emphasizes the detrimental effects the new rationing diet

⁵⁸ DR 2971, “Reply to February 1942 Directive.”

has had on people's overall health. He describes that people have generally lost weight and that individuals take longer to recover from colds.⁵⁹ He directly contradicts the Ministry of Food's aims to improve dietary health and is almost the only respondent who not only complains about the quality and quantity of rationing, but also its effects on the British public's overall well being. Accordingly, there may be little "truth" to his opinion, but what is significant is his ability to relay how he feels without internalizing any of the Ministry's propaganda. While most male respondents did not respond in such negative ways, most importantly these respondents represent British men's ability to complain openly. British men had no difficulty describing certain failures of the rationing system, compared to women's inability to complain unless it was in relation to equality.

As men specifically related rationing and the food situation with women, a significant amount of respondents relied on their wives or mothers to respond while some of them ignored the directive altogether; however, when male respondents did respond they were more apt to express the difficulties placed on women. One respondent, who lives in what he describes as a very "agricultural district," mentions the difficulties particular to country life on women. He mentions that the "housewife is at the mercy of the local grocer" and that it is impossible for women to make a daily tour of all the shops to see what is available.⁶⁰ He recognizes that it is a disadvantage and a great burden on women, who already work extra hard to make complete meals with what is available. The male respondent is able to disassociate himself from Ministry of Food publications that stress women's responsibility to keep morale up and mention the impossibilities of some of their work. While he is still optimistic in his report, he does not pretend that the food situation is entirely without problems, especially in regard to the

⁵⁹ DR 2724, "Reply to February 1942 Directive."

⁶⁰ DR 1403, "Reply to February 1942 Directive."

impractical expectations on women. Another man finds that the “careful and continuous planning” of housekeeping calls for “all the qualities of a saint,” which he says men cannot accomplish.⁶¹ This male respondent also realizes the intense responsibility that women and housewives face on a daily basis due to the rationing system and admits that most men would not be able to handle the problems. He does not emphasize women’s patriotic duty, but simply states that the food situation is not ideal for housewives and causes undue stress, something that female respondents would never admit. Male directive respondents more effectively communicated the hardships and impossibilities that women faced due to rationing in wartime Britain, and admitted women’s “saint-like” qualities in carrying out their duties.

Other male respondents were more specific about the hardships of rationing that women faced. For instance one man complains that female munition workers hardly have any time to shop because of the early closings at five o’clock in the evening.⁶² In fact, many male respondents mention not only the difficulties of rationing and shopping, but also that women who work find an impossible situation to both shop and feed their husbands due to their schedules. Out of the very few female directive responses that identified themselves as workers, none of them directly complain about their shopping time. Unlike the female workers, male respondents had no problem stating the issues with the current food situation in Britain. In order to cope, men did not need to internalize a sense of civic duty and stoicism in regards to food, such as women maintained during the war. Thus, it was far easier for them to complain about food, and especially the troubles they noticed it caused housewives and women who worked. Another male directive respondent emphasizes the “enormous queues” and describes that to receive their December rations families from his area had to complain in writing to the local food

⁶¹ DR 1161, “Reply to February 1942 Directive.”

⁶² DR 2925, “Reply to February 1942 Directive.”

office as numerous calls failed to have an effect.⁶³ Not only does he address his grievances in the anonymous Mass Observation directive response, but also explains he had little difficulty with the decision to complain to the food office to receive their rations. He expresses his sympathy for the women who have to deal with long queues and finds the food situation not up to the standards the government promised. Male respondents felt no obligation to accept the rationing scheme in absolute terms and made their opinions about the troubles placed on women clear.

Mass Observation male respondents also tended to describe the food situation with detailed lists about the availability of food items more often than their female counterparts. One man remarks that they are living on a “war diet” and then proceeds to list deficiencies and items they are able to obtain for a multitude of items such as baby powder, tobacco, and raisins to name a few.⁶⁴ Numerous men immediately respond to the directive in this manner, as instead of emphasizing their support like women in the beginning, they list advantages and disadvantages through the list of food items. Their perceptions are immediately more factual and while most still do insist the system is good for Britain, it is far easier for men to focus on the inefficiencies or failures. One male respondent perfectly illustrates this tendency when he remarks, “Let us consider the different articles of food individually.” He proceeds to list all of the common types of food and provides details such as price change, or particulars such as with oranges, “if you want your child’s ration you must be nippy.”⁶⁵ While the man is ultimately supportive of the system, he has no troubles listing problems. Male respondents’ ability to rationally consider the food situation in the absence of a self-sacrificing duty led many British men to disassociate from patriotism and simply state their true opinions.

⁶³ DR 2930, “Reply to February 1942 Directive.”

⁶⁴ DR 2142, “Reply to February 1942 Directive.”

⁶⁵ DR 2736, “Reply to February 1942 Directive.”

While female respondents also mentioned deterrents to equality, men frequently referred to the ubiquity of black markets and more often admitted to partaking in the practice. One respondent admits he does not know much about the food situation, only that meat is scarce, but he states, “As for the black market my impression is that we are all at it.” He then goes on to describe extra eggs if you know a farmer and that meat, butter, marmalade and all the sweets that one could want of course can be obtained.⁶⁶ This man refuses to describe the overall food situation, as that is his wife’s knowledge, but he willingly describes his role in terms of the black market. His response demonstrates a gendered notion that equates men with the black market. Indeed, in wartime Britain the black market conjured up images of well-dressed men known as “spivs” who ran the underground crime scene.⁶⁷ While this respondent may have felt guilty about his involvement, he rationalizes by describing its commonplace. Another man mentions that he thinks there is a large black market and that luxuries are only attainable from “under the counter.” He admits that while his family does not participate, the chief reason they do well with the food situation is that they eat all their main meals out. He maintains it would be fairer if they had to surrender their coupons when they eat out.⁶⁸ The male respondent questions the Ministry of Food's carefully constructed image of fairness with no difficulty, as he mentions the social flaws in the rationing scheme. British men more often described the black market and their subsequent participation, but still maintained that overall rationing had a sense of social justice.

Although criticisms of the food situation in Britain generally came from male Mass Observation directive respondents, it is important to remember that men also embraced Ministry of Food propaganda. A majority of men still eventually praised the government’s efforts; even if initially they focused on the troubles it caused women or the lack of variety in their meals. Men

⁶⁶ DR 1393, “Reply to February 1942 Directive.”

⁶⁷ Lizzie Collingham, *The Taste of War: World War II and the Battle for Food*, (London: Allen Lane, 2011), 375.

⁶⁸ DR 1372, “Reply to February 1942 Directive.”

did not have the same inability to complain unless it involved inequality as women, but their grouses rarely denounced the entire rationing system; instead, they focused on issues that they deemed as significant to the food situation in Britain.

Female responses regarding women's attitude toward the food situation

Female directive respondents described other women's attitudes as similar to how they perceived the food situation. They explained that the discussion of food and activities related to rationing comprised the majority of conversation between women. Female directive respondents generally expressed that the overall attitude of women was very satisfied. One woman depicts a popular opinion when she describes, "Everyone I have talked to is very grateful for the abundant food supply, and I have heard no grumbles at all."⁶⁹ However, the description of the general attitude of women also proved to be a way to convey negativity for women, especially regarding favoritism or inequality. As it did not directly involve their own opinion, women found it easier to discuss equality failures.

As women needed to produce meals for their husbands and families, it comes as no surprise that food constituted the primary topic for discussion amongst women during the war. It was a topic worth noting when female respondents described women's attitudes towards the food situation. Women frequently admitted they could not help but discuss food in the majority of their conversations. Although one woman has a maid that does most of the cooking and shopping she admits that she and her friends discuss food a great deal. Despite trying to avoid the subject she describes evasion as "a job of King Charles' head and always creeps back again."⁷⁰ Using a now obscure allusion, she demonstrates the impact rationing has had on women as she and her

⁶⁹ DR 2046, "Reply to February 1942 Directive."

⁷⁰ DR 1577, "Reply to February 1942 Directive."

friends have an irrational obsession with food. Despite the fact little of the household responsibility actually falls on her, she still recognizes her part in the war effort; as a woman she must participate in the kitchen front. Thus she discusses new food items and other items with her friends to in a sense to fulfill her duty. Another housewife explains that food has been “discussed ad nauseam.”⁷¹ While she still supports the kitchen front effort, this female respondent also recognizes that rationing has transformed the lives of British women and resents the fact food has transcended the kitchen and queues to become commonplace conversation. However, not all women emphasized the tedium of rationing conversation as one respondent describes, “Women are discussing food a great deal in buses and in the shops, and can often be heard exchanging economy recipes or tips.”⁷² A majority of women relied on exchanging ideas to make meals more interesting to their unsatisfied families. While the Ministry of Food bombarded housewives with radio shows and advertisements about nutrition and new ways to prepare meals, most Britons found the new recipes, and National (bread) loaf, to taste horrible.⁷³ Thus, most women also had the responsibility of cooking meals that their families would actually eat with severely limited quality and quantities of food. Most women admitted they discussed food too often, but it could also be a source of help and probably a safe place to vent frustrations when they had to manage morale amongst their family.

Although female respondents insisted that other women found the food situation as satisfactory as they did, they still described “petty complaints” from other women, which they diminished as trivial. A woman from Coventry first responds that women are “contented” on the food matter, but then goes on to admit that the “the chief exception is a very fat woman, who is definitely greedy” and dismisses her complaints as “she, however, is food mad, always was, and

⁷¹ DR 2860, “Reply to February 1942 Directive.”

⁷² DR 3017, “Reply to February 1942 Directive.”

⁷³ Richard Farmer, *The Food Companions*, 38.

therefore hardly counts.”⁷⁴ The respondent separates the “greedy” woman from the expectations that she shares with other women and concludes that her complaints are insignificant. The respondent refuses to admit that some women are unhappy with the system because she herself understands the importance of maintaining the kitchen front standards and at all times displaying a stoic and satisfied attitude. Another woman maintains, “It is fashionable in this district to moan about the inability to obtain certain foods... and complain of the difficulties of planning meals, but when pressed people always admit that we do exceedingly well for food.”⁷⁵ Asserting her own outlook upon the general feelings of women in Great Britain, this respondent also ignores dissent as she attempts to maintain morale. Even in an anonymous directive, most women felt the need to uphold their wartime responsibility of optimism. Another female respondent summarizes the rest of the respondents’ feelings about certain grouses declaring, “I find most of the complaints petty. Stocks of food are pretty good in our shops and all ration requirements have been met.”⁷⁶ Unless complaints related to issues involving inequality, female respondents dismissed them and argued that most women were extremely content or happy with the rationing system.

While women recognized disparities in their depictions of the food situation, a majority of female respondents acknowledged the “real grouses” about inequality in the discussion about women’s attitude towards the food situation. A woman who has a landlady, in which she describes has a “persuasive tongue with the shopkeepers,” finds that women are “facing it pretty cheerfully.” However, she admits that rampant favoritism and “under counter shopping” are the causes of discontent and complaints.⁷⁷ While her tone does not evoke the same disapproval as

⁷⁴ DR 1078, “Reply to February 1942 Directive.”

⁷⁵ DR 1432, “Reply to February 1942 Directive.”

⁷⁶ DR 2478, “Reply to February 1942 Directive.”

⁷⁷ DR 3001, “Reply to February 1942 Directive.”

other respondents, perhaps because she benefits from her landlady's unpatriotic persuasion, she still contends that women's attitude towards the food situation is cheerful despite the inequalities. Although she does not directly complain herself, she emphasizes the cheerful coping mechanism women expressed and she herself relies on. One female respondent also explains grumbles involving equality, as she describes women whose husbands work at manual jobs and need more than their small share of rations "make most of the grumbling." She uses this opportunity to indirectly express her own grievances stating, "If only the government would stop luxury feeding in the hotels, no one would grumble at all, not to mean anything; when people do grumble they usually end up with 'oh well considering all things we should not grumble.'" ⁷⁸ This respondent accurately conveys the complexity of women's feelings towards rationing. Although women and the respondents were very nearly conditioned to respond in a positive manner, she demonstrates women found indirect ways to address their burdens or complaints even if at the end they wound up qualifying their statements.

An overwhelming majority of female respondents explained that overall, women's attitudes toward the food situation tended to be cheerful and accepting. Even when perhaps female Mass Observation respondents acknowledged complaints about favoritism or inequality, they rationalized these opinions or maintained that they were insignificant compared to the overwhelming majority of cheerful opinions. To convince themselves as well as others experiencing the harsh realities of rationing, women most always expressed their opinions in this positive manner, disguising their voicing of injustices.

⁷⁸ DR 2898, "Reply to February 1942 Directive."

Male responses regarding women's attitude towards the food situation

When male respondents used their own observations they maintained that women cheerfully accepted the burdens of rationing despite the hardships, but acknowledged occasional grumbling. Men were more likely to admit to hearing women complain, especially about favoritism or British citizens failing to uphold their national duties in relation to rationing. However, when women influenced male respondents, as when men admitted they relied on their wives or mother's opinions instead of their own observations, most men reported there were almost no female complaints.

Without the influence of their wives or other female relatives, men expressed a qualified response from their observations about women's attitude towards the food situation. For instance, one male respondent notices, "housewives are worried to death to find meals, particularly dinners, but are mostly good-tempered about it." He mentions the difficulties of shopping, but he explains that he mostly has heard women complain about the "universal grouse" that wealthy people and large houses are getting more than their "fair share" and "not sharing in this 'equality of sacrifice' that we hear so much about."⁷⁹ This respondent recognizes women's optimism despite the numerous hardships they face. He also demonstrates that it is inequality that warrants most of women's grouses and that it was not the burdens of the system that bothers them. A male respondent from Morden, Surrey emphasizes that women accept the situation "fairly cheerfully" as "most women agree with the fairness of rationing and understand the reason for smaller rations generally."⁸⁰ Without mentioning any complaints or even the burdens women face on a daily basis, the man from Surrey also concludes that women are fairly cheerful about the food situation. As numerous male responses also mentioned cheerful attitudes,

⁷⁹ DR 2734, "Reply to February 1942 Directive."

⁸⁰ DR 2723, "Reply to February 1942 Directive."

it would seem that women either used a cheerful disposition as a coping mechanism or took it upon themselves to keep everyone's spirits high. British men described occasional grievances expressed by women, but emphasized that like themselves, women largely "made do" and cheerfully accepted the food situation.

However, some male respondents only focused on the reasons women dislike rationing and ignored answering their overall attitude about the food situation. For instance one man only describes hardships, forming a list about the inconveniences women encounter. He maintains that women dislike the time spent queuing and getting food, the increases in price, the fear of retaliation if they report a grocer, and finally, wondering what the next meal will be or where it is coming from.⁸¹ While he does not provide information as to whether he asked someone in particular or if it is solely from his observations, he is adamant that these are the reasons women "dislike" the food situation. However, he does not provide a general consensus of women's feelings towards rationing. Simply observing women, he could have noticed the burdens they faced which would not have necessarily matched what a woman would have described. Another male respondent describes women find rationing tiresome, however, "they join with the men in praising the general administration of the food problem."⁸² This man depicts a hardship on housewives and women, but he connects that they praise the system just like the unburdened men when he describes their attitude. Women outwardly expressed their support for the food situation, as dealing with rationing and preparing food was considered their contribution to war effort. As such, without an assessment of women's overall attitude, men only related rationing to the extra work and inconveniences women dealt with on a daily basis.

⁸¹ DR 2674, "Reply to February 1942 Directive."

⁸² DR 2599, "Reply to February 1942 Directive."

While male respondents described women's opinions as positive overall, mentioning some grievances, the influence of women affected their descriptions as they reported housewives have almost no complaints about rationing. One male respondent explains his wife has supplied him with the following facts about women, with the first describing, "People don't grumble about rationing. They are learning to make do." The next descriptions are about how women talk more about food and about how they exchange rations.⁸³ As a housewife's responsibility was to make wartime food burdens ordinary and subsequently manage their emotions, it comes as no surprise that men influenced by their wives, did not describe any negative feelings towards the food situation. Several male respondents admitted their wives directly informed them of other women's attitudes and a significant amount of men felt they had no authority to report on this part of the directive. A man who relies on his wife, as he is in active service, relays that she "adheres strictly to the rations allowed" and her only complaints are about the "many weaker folk" who attempt to get more than their rations.⁸⁴ When male respondents depended on other women to help them answer the directive their responses were very similar to female directive respondents, in which they were positive unless the grouses related to a lack of equality.

While male respondents reported that on the whole, women cheerfully accepted the hardships due to rationing, they were far more likely to acknowledge grumbling. British men described hearing women complain mostly about favoritism and the failure to participate in the notion of fair shares for all by receiving extras. Some men ignored the overall "women's attitude" part of the directive and focused solely on the observations they made which led to a description of numerous burdens women faced. Conversely, when women influenced male

⁸³ DR 1097, "Reply to February 1942 Directive."

⁸⁴ DR 2568, "Reply to February 1942 Directive."

respondents an overwhelming majority of men reported there were almost no grouses about the current food situation.

Conclusion

Although individual Mass Observation directive respondents emphasized different aspects of the food situation in Britain, their observations illustrate trends in regards to the perception of rationing. Even though women experienced the largest burdens of rationing, most women reported positive accounts to maintain optimism on the kitchen front. Their only grievances were disguised as justified criticisms of people failing to uphold their wartime responsibility of the equality of sacrifice. Female respondents also mentioned Great Britain's fortune compared to other starving European countries and emphasized extreme satisfaction with the food situation.

Men expressed a more qualified satisfaction with the food situation, when they actually responded to the "feminine" directive. Male respondents found it easier to discuss problematic aspects of rationing, such as the black market, and focused on lists of specific food items that were obtainable and unavailable in their counties. Inequality did not concern men as often, but rather the lack of variety in their diets. However, similar to women, they described the food situation in favorable terms in the end.

Both male and female directive respondents described women's attitude towards the food situation as being cheerful and accepting overall. Both acknowledged that favoritism and inequality tended to be the only complaints women expressed. However, men found it easier to observe women's hardships and emphasize housewives' discontent with the system. In contrast,

women usually expressed their opinions in a positive manner, choosing to disguise or disregard grouses that conflicted with their wartime responsibility to manage their selfish ideas.

As these directive respondents demonstrate, wartime rationing proved to be a complex system that in no way resembled a united group of Britons working together to provide fair shares for everyone. While other social historians have also used the Mass Observation archive as a means to convey popular opinions among Britons in the Second World War, most have relied on the surveys and quantified general attitudes. Few historians have concentrated on the effects of rationing on British women, and even fewer on this paper's topic. My study provides valuable information about the public's perception of rationing and how Britons believed the food situation impacted the lives of women in a new way.

Through my exploration of the Mass Observation February 1942 directive, I show that this archive provides insight into unquantifiable information about the experience of rationing during the war. The directives have detailed responses that demonstrate the opinions of British citizens who experienced food rationing differently according to a variety of factors, most notably gender, which surveys and statistics cannot express. A percentage or number cannot convey multifaceted perceptions. While this method is subjective, relying on respondent's diction and expression to formulate conclusions, this same complication is able to more accurately demonstrate the complex nature of Briton's perceptions during the tumultuous war.

The British women who responded to the February directive demonstrate this complexity. As this paper shows, female respondents were not singularly optimistic, they described hardships and mentioned complaints, but in different ways. Ministry of Food propaganda stressed that women exhibit selflessness to keep up everyone's morale, and carefully manage their kitchen front. Consequently, as it was their responsibility to make wartime food an ordinary experience,

female respondents needed to describe the food situation as in a cheerful way to maintain their selfless duty. Although the Mass Observation directives were anonymous, in order for women to cope with this burden, women needed to always exhibit this way of viewing rationing.

However, that did not stop the British women from expressing more subtle problems with the rationing system as they disguised these feelings with “proper” feelings of thankfulness. By focusing on optimistic aspects of the food situation in Britain, female respondents did not betray their kitchen front duty, yet they still managed to sometimes express less than ideal aspects of the situation in a concealed manner. Both to themselves and society overall, women avoided expressing direct discontent with the rationing system in Great Britain through careful and cheerful wording. Of which, these circumstances can only be explained upon examination of more than just surveys or statistics about general opinions.

While both genders described rationing in favorable terms as a way to psychologically cope with wartime burdens, men’s disassociation with homemaking responsibility made it easier for male respondents to convey issues with the rationing system or complain in terms other than inequality. Women on the other hand, encountered repeated efforts by the government to convince housewives of their kitchen front duty. As a result, women strove towards selflessness to keep up everyone’s morale and careful management to make wartime food an ordinary experience. Female Mass Observation respondents not only embraced optimism as a coping mechanism to deal with their added wartime difficulties, but they also internalized this kitchen front duty, so that any grievances could only be related to inequality. Subsequently, this paper demonstrates that Britons perceived rationing according to their gender and described the food situation in February of 1942 and women’s attitude towards it, in significantly different ways.

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