

# On the „Home Front“ - Westphalia and Lippe in the First World War

English Version  
of the Commentary

Translation: Helen Swetlik



Für die Menschen.  
Für Westfalen-Lippe.

# On the Home Front - Westphalia and Lippe in the First World War

Photos and documents compiled and commented on by Markus Schröder

## Chapter 1 – Start of the War

During the last few days of July in 1914 there was only one question on the minds of the people of Westphalia and Lippe: “Is there going to be a war?”

When the German Emperor ordered full military mobilisation on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 1914 there was loud cheer as well as scepticism and fear. In all the official accounts the cheering was in the foreground.

Münster's town archivist Eduard Schulte wrote the following in the official war chronicle:

**“The unprecedented enthusiasm which was both unstoppable and overpowering burst through with terrific force. Never to be forgotten are the people standing on the markets: how the never-ending cheering, the songs of celebration and the thundering hurrahs left their mark in the hearts of the people forever.”**

During the following days thousands of soldiers in garrison towns, as here in Minden, Siegen or Münster, prepared to go to war.

Most of them presumed the war would be over quickly. The photos from this time often show smiling and optimistic soldiers. It is not possible to say whether this open optimism was genuine, or simply an attempt to fulfil public expectations.

The message in the propaganda at the time emphasised repeatedly that the public euphoria had touched every single citizen. But in reality, the mood was complex. Particularly in the rural areas where the harvest was due, the enthusiasm was lower than in more middle-class circles or in the towns.

In many places though, the apparent total public euphoria was apparently quite impressive. Lise Beuge, a schoolgirl from Lüdenscheid writes in her diary:

**“The enthusiasm among the people is amazing. Everyone is willing to sacrifice his blood and his life for the fatherland. Everyone knows that this battle means life or death, victory or death.”**

At the same time the mood of the war became frenzied and neurotic. When the newspapers warned of foreign spies, everyone began hunting them down. In Münster they even looked in the sewers. They even suspected spies of being in the countryside.

Antonia Helming, a housewife from Ahaus describes in her diary:

**“In the evening there were loads of people. Two Russians have been caught. They were harmless harvest workers who called the Mayor for protection. Dr. van Delden’s driver from Gronau was shot dead by farmers who thought it was suspicious French car.”**

Along with euphoria and hysteria for the war there were also signs of fear. With public announcements and articles in the newspapers the authorities tried to prevent people withdrawing their savings from the banks and stocking up with food. Cautionary measures, which were obviously taken on a massive scale.

Concerns about the effects of a war could not be expressed openly during this period of “hurrah patriotism” due to censorship. References to these concerns can be found mainly in private notes:

Antonia Helming writes:

**“For 27 years my husband and I have lived in peace and have had a happy family life. God gave us 13 children and they were all born under happy stars, the star of peace. But what will it be like when the war reaches us, what will happen?”**

At the beginning, open rejection of the war is not documented in Westphalia. The Social Democratic Party in Bielefeld did however demonstrate against the impending war at the end of July, but after the outbreak of the war they followed the Emperor’s call for a so-called party truce (“Burgfriede”) and supported military action.

## **Chapter 2 – Activation on the Home Front**

As soon as the war started, activities started in all villages and towns to support the troops at war as well as the soldiers’ families who had lost their breadwinner after being called up.

Along with the local authorities it was mainly the Women's Groups who began organising various services. In all the train stations, as here in Dortmund, refreshment stands were put up for the travelling soldiers. In schools and club rooms thousands of parcels with so-called love-donations (alms) were packed for the soldiers on the war front. This was a task that the women and girls were going to spend a lot of time doing during the following years.

The school girl Lise Beuge from Lüdenscheid comments:

**“It was happy chaos packing in the school. Everyone brings something for the soldiers. Small parcels and big ones with chocolate, cigars, coffee, sweets, tobacco and loads of other useful things were sent off. Each parcel carries the address of a poor, homeless warrior. How happy he will be.”**

Football clubs such as Westphalia Schalke, later Schalke 04, were also active on the home front. They organised charity matches for the Red Cross and packed parcels for comrades on the war front.

All over the place clothes were made and knitted, money and donations in kind were collected for needy families of soldiers and parcels were packed for the soldiers. These activities often saw groups coming together who were, up until then, strictly divided on grounds of politics or religion. Thus, the mythos of the home front emerged where the divisions of social class were overcome and where everyone stood together.

Until the end of the war the Women's Groups, like here in Minden for example, Gelsenkirchen or Münster organised collections again and again to support the soldiers on the war front and their suffering families, and also to support those who were soon to lose the main breadwinner of the family.

In 1915 a very special way of collecting donations became widespread. On the initiative of the towns, municipalities, clubs and societies the people began hammering nails into landmarks in towns. The donor bought a nail which he then, for example, hammered into a statue of a young Teutonic man in Münster, into an iron cross in Bad Oeynhausen or into a smithy in Hagen. Throughout the whole country this created a symbol for a sense of community armoured in iron nails.

These local ways of mobilising the home front were complemented by government propaganda, which called on the willingness to make sacrifices and the patriotism of everyone. More than once the people were called upon to buy war loans to help finance the war. At the beginning many people bought these war loans, but later these loans were less successful.

Another important aspect of the forming home front was the state censorship by the civil and military authorities. From the beginning of the war onwards they checked the reporting in newspapers and ensured that the picture painted about the events on the war front as well about the daily routine at home was a rosy one.

Also the innumerable products of the postcard and souvenir industry tried to take away the horror of the war in thousands of different pictures.

### **Chapter 3 – The World of Work during the War**

From the very beginning the war made a huge impact on the world of work in Westphalia and Lippe. All areas of industries had to cope with a shortage of workers and production problems due to a shortage of materials. The men who had gone off to war left huge gaps in companies, factories and on farms.

In order to counteract the shortage of materials they organised big collections of materials which were important for the war here in Paderborn.

But the collections alone were insufficient. Soon the authorities began confiscating materials such as leather, wool, cotton and metal.

Church bells were also confiscated. As here in Minden, Vreden, Lemgo and Gelsenkirchen, the bells were ceremonially taken down from the church towers to then be melted down for war purposes.

Production was effected more by the shortage of workers than by the shortage of materials. Due to the conscription of many thousands of workers the Ruhr mining industry lost about 100.000 workers and the steel works in Dortmund suddenly lost half of its workforce.

The situation was similar in the countryside. Many farmers and farm helps became soldiers, which meant their wives, children and parents had to run the farms. The situation was made

even worse because many horses were also taken for military service and these were then not available for work on the land.

Because the start of the war was during harvest time and help was needed fast, students and school children were called on to help with the harvest.

Gradually the authorities began to assign the men, who hadn't been called up for military service, to work in farming and also in industry.

In addition the women took on more and more jobs which had once been done by men.

Often it was women whose husbands had been called up and who now had to provide for their families on their own. In many towns employment offices were set up.

Münster's town archivist Eduard Schulte writes:

**“The employment office, which was used at lot at the beginning of the war, provided several hundred women and girls with jobs and work in the train maintenance depots, military workplaces, private households and military hospitals. Up until the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1915 alone, 1065 people registered for work. The military clothing authorities gave the employment office large amounts of sewing work which needy women were given to do at home.”**

The only reason making it possible for women to work was the provision of childcare in many towns, where the children were looked after whilst the mothers went to work. Despite such help the lives of many working women must have been very difficult. Firstly, they mostly only earned about half of what the men would have earned doing the same work and secondly the women often had to queue for food for hours on end and do extra household chores.

Nevertheless more and more women started working in factories, for example here in Recklinghausen or in Hamm. This development, which was a stark contrast to the traditional role of women as guardians of the home and kitchen, caused a lot of antagonism in society.

Women working could, however, not compensate for the dramatic shortage of workers. For this reason it was other groups of people in the community, who had appeared with the war: prisoners of war and civilian foreign workers, who were called upon.

Due to the initial military success of the German armed forces, large numbers of prisoners of war were taken shortly after the war started and in Westphalia a number of camps were set up for them. At the beginning the men had to live in temporary camps on open fields, in pits in the ground or in makeshift huts. Then over time, proper accommodation was built and depending on the size of the camp they sometimes even had their own libraries, theatres and concert halls. The people in the community had mixed feeling towards the prisoners of war. On the one hand they were the enemy and so they had to be treated with distance and disapproval. On the other hand the foreign soldiers who came from faraway countries brought with them a fascinating touch of a world far away from the backwaters of Westphalia. So at the beginning, the Westphalian civilians went to the fences of the camps regularly to stare at the prisoners of war like animals in the zoo. But soon the authorities prohibited this.

Over time the prisoner camps grew considerably. The largest camps were here in Minden with 25.000, in Senne with 75.000 and in the three camps in Münster together totalling 90.000 prisoners of war.

In actual fact most of the prisoners of war didn't live in the camps. About three quarters of them were sent out to work in various places. This meant that in Westphalia over 280.000 prisoners of war worked in industry and in agriculture.

Despite the massive assignment of prisoners of war and women it was still not possible to maintain the industrial and agricultural productivity at the pre-war level. On the contrary: productivity dropped drastically during the war.

## **Chapter 4 – Provision for the Civilian Population**

In August 1914 in Germany everyone presumed that the war would be over in a few months. The newspapers wrote: We have bread! They calculated that in the next few months there would be sufficient grain. Hardly anyone envisaged the war lasting for over four years.

Due to the British naval blockade, it was impossible for Germany to import food and artificial fertilizer for agriculture and providing the population with food became increasingly difficult. Flour, eggs, and meat – everything became scarce and the prices doubled rapidly and often even higher than double.

The municipalities and the government soon saw themselves being forced into intervening in food production and its distribution. They tried to fix maximum prices, but many farmers and traders refused to keep to them. This is when the first cracks appeared in the home front.

Münster's town archivist reports:

**“To give a wounded soldier a pound of butter for 1.50 Marks, the farmer's wife answered, she had no intention of selling the butter and she would rather sell it to the French. Another farmer explained that the people of Münster would soon have to pay 3 Marks for a pound of butter. A third farmer said he would rather put the butter in the pig trough than reduce the price.”**

Due to the state-controlled economy the farmers soon had to give up some of their products to official authorities and to licenced traders at fixed prices. This food was then rationed and only given out with food ration cards. The longer the war lasted, the smaller the rations became.

Lise Beuge from Lüdenscheid writes in her diary:

**“First, food ration cards for bread, which have been around for a long time now. Then the queues for soap, butter, fat, sugar, flour and rice. Nothing but cards! For the other smaller things the selling cards. Otherwise we can't get anything. They have set up food stores. If you need butter you have to wait from 6 am until 4 pm until you get some. There are so many people there. You can't get potatoes at all anymore.”**

But it wasn't only food which was scarce. Because the ever increasing number of regiments needed enormous amounts of material – weapons, vehicles, and clothing – there was a shortage of everything on the home front. So everything was collected and used in some form or manner: from the pips in fruit to old clothing.

To try to fight the food shortage the farmers were told to grow more, but this didn't work out due to a lack of workers, fertilizer and seeds.

In addition, the housewives were also called upon to do their duty: In courses and with councillors they had to learn how to budget more carefully. In addition, in many towns, areas



of waste land were provided for people to grow their own vegetables. But the worse the food shortage became the more often such vegetable patches were plundered.

The degree to how badly the people were affected by the food shortage depended heavily on where they lived. While the farmers and some of the people living in the countryside as producers had few problems, the hardship in the towns became worse and worse. This led to many inhabitants from the Ruhr area, as here at the station in Dortmund, making food-hoarding trips into the countryside to buy food illegally from the farmers. From 1916 this food-hoarding became a widespread phenomenon.

Münster's town archivist comments:

**“Every single day droves of food-hoarders spill out of the trains across the countryside. Women, children and old people with baskets, suitcases and handbags push and shove to get to the farmers first. In groups or individually, the food-hoarders walk from farmyard to farmyard until late in the evening. Bent double under the weight of their bags, these gypsy-looking, bedraggled people, moaning and groaning, arrive back at the station and it isn't seldom that they lose all their hard-collected things when the police confiscate everything.”**

## **Chapter 5 – The Wounded, War-Disabled People and Fatalities**

Along with the fight for food the biggest concern among the civilian population was the worry about their family members at the war front. Would the son, brother, father survive the next military encounter, the next battle?

The families kept in touch with their family members on the war front with millions of letters. At the beginning many letters were filled with hope and optimism but soon disillusionment set in. At least in snatches the population at home learnt through the letters and postcards what it was really like on the war front and what the family member was up against.

At the beginning, the numbers of fatalities and injured were published in lists in the newspapers. But soon the authorities recognised that the long lists were undermining the mood and morale on the home front.

Münster's town archivist Eduard Schulte writes in 1914:

„The statistics on the losses of our military forces which the Dortmund Evening Newspaper publishes on the 10<sup>th</sup> of every month have been prohibited by the Deputy General Commander.”

But the dying continued on the war front. This could be seen in the obituaries or when the news suddenly arrived at home; the news that had been feared for so long.

Antonia Helming from Ahaus writes in her diary:

**“This morning the postman asked to speak to our father about an urgent matter. He brought the following telegram:  
‘Your son, Hans, died a hero for his fatherland during a successful attack yesterday. Should you wish your son to be brought home, please contact the Deputy Supreme Commander in Münster.’  
I can’t write anymore. The pain is too much.”**

But it wasn't only the number of fatalities; it was also the many injured which caused the emotions on the home front to run high. 4.9 million men were injured during the war. Just after the start of the war the numbers were so high that, for example, in Münster a purpose-built station for the injured and wounded was set up, along with a military hospital, for example in the hot air balloon hanger of the flying club or in the town theatre.

In the largest military hospital in Westphalia, the sanatorium Bethel in Bielefeld, approximately 30.000 wounded soldiers were treated during the war. This also included the seriously injured receiving prostheses.

There are many photos of the military hospitals in many Westphalian towns. And regardless of whether they show Gelsenkirchen as in this picture or Gütersloh here, they always depict a glossy cover-up of the real situation. They almost all show injured people who are “fit and healthy”, sometimes even smiling, and who are almost unaffected by their injuries.

But there are pictures which illustrate the serious injuries the soldiers returned with from the war front. When people saw these war victims on the streets they were shocked.

Lise Beuge from Lüdenscheid describes such an encounter:

**“Oh, what sort of a person! His nose was missing, there were only two holes and the mouth was torn up. His arm was bent to the left and twitched the whole time. His hands and feet were in constant movement due to the nerves. Awful. Dreadful.”**

The official authorities tried to integrate the badly disfigured soldiers back into the working process. After all, there was a shortage of workers and a state provision for all these injured would have been far too costly.

Nevertheless, 2.7 million men had to be provided for financially and medically even after the end of the war. The dead, wounded and disabled were a brutal contradiction to the harmless played-down depiction of the war in the pictures on the millions of postcards which had been in circulation since 1914, with which the population was confronted, where nothing had been funny, romantic or glorious. The enthusiasm for the war diminished.

## **Chapter 6 – The Long Way until the End of the War**

The food shortage which had been a huge problem during the first two years of the war became absolutely unbearable with the so-called “turnip winter” 1916/17. Turnips, along with food which were stretched with blood, bones or sawdust, the so-called substitute foods became the daily companion. And there weren’t even enough of these.

Lise Beuge from Lüdenscheid writes in her diary in April 1917:

**“The worst thing of all is the hunger, hunger, hunger, in the countryside and on the war front. There are no potatoes left, mostly only turnips. Turnips in the morning, at lunchtime, in the afternoon and in the evening, in all sorts of variations, as a vegetable, as soup, as meat substitute, as pudding, nothing but turnips. It’s no wonder that the people are rising up and causing rebellions in the bigger towns and cities.”**

The humour and wit with which the people coped with the food shortage at the beginning disappeared rapidly. The only thing that remained among the thousands of people having to queue up every day was a growing rage. Rage about the so-called money-spongers and profiteers. But the trust in the state also faded, the state which despite constantly passing new legislation and regulations couldn’t manage to guarantee enough food for the people.

Even Münster's town archivist writes in December 1916:

**“When you have to experience for months how poor hungry boys rummage for waste vegetables and fruit pickings under the arches of Münster, in the street gutters on the cathedral square or on the market before they sweep away the rubbish, how the children beg for crumbs or leftovers in the bakery and how they charge ‘10 pfennigs for rubbish’ in the fruit shops probably 100 times a day– on top of so many other incidents every day. Whether those who really believe in Germany’s justified war and God’s kind divinity in this harsh third winter at war, must start worrying about whether the country can economically hold up.”**

Despite all the attempts to alleviate the hardship with public soup kitchens, like the one here in Gelsenkirchen or here in Dortmund many places were suffering starvation. The insufficient nutrition of the population caused a weakening in their physical resistance. More and more, illnesses such as influenza and pneumonia ended fatally. The war didn't only cost lives on the war front. In 1918 in Westphalia 80% more people died than before the war.

1916 saw the first hunger riots and strikes, often initiated by women. The military authorities tried to prevent these strikes in industries and threatened to send the striking workers to the war front.

The wish that the war should finally come to an end grew in the whole population. This was also expressed in the religious processions. However, what this peace should look like was highly controversial. Whilst a large part of the population hoped for peace as victors and gaining further territory, there were voices from the “Reichstag” in Berlin which called for a negotiated peace treaty without territory gain.

How many people were still willing in 1918, in the fourth year at war, to suffer even more hardship for peace as victors is difficult to say, but the number of those who no longer wanted to keep quiet, grew. Especially in the Ruhr area, 1917/18 saw an increasing numbers of strikes in which thousands of workers took part.

During the course of these strikes leaflets appeared calling for the end of the German Empire. It is difficult to say what the echo to such ideas was among the people of Westphalia.

In addition to the hunger and the labour strikes news from Berlin in autumn 1918 caused a high degree of uncertainty. Although the newspapers were still reporting on further defeats of the enemies, the Army Commander appointed a new government, that wanted to end the war and that requested peace negotiations of the American President Wilson.

Münster's town archivist writes on 14. October 1918:

**“In the flustered questions about the reasons for our totally sudden collapse these are the answers which are being given: the failure in the submarine war, the weaknesses of our allies, the underestimation of the USA, the combat fatigue of the troops, their repeated complaints about the class differences, the characteristics of the new replacements, physical weakness after several years of malnutrition, the disillusionment, the all-time low of morale in the fatherland.”**

In November 1918, initiated in the marines there were soldier uprisings throughout Germany. So-called workers' and soldiers' councils took over power in many places, including in Westphalia. The German Empire collapsed. For many Westphalians this was a catastrophe.

Antonia Helming from Ahaus writes on the 9. November:

**“The news hit us like a bolt of lightning: the Emperor has abdicated, the crown prince too. I cried at the news, our wonderful Emperor, our poor Germany! Revolution is all over the place. Here in Ahaus a workers' and soldiers' council has been set up.”**

Two days later the armistice was signed. The war which had lasted 4 years and 3 months was over. But its effects were going to remain in Germany and Europe for years.