

**Keywords:** Great Britain, World War II, Rationing, Scarcity, Home Front



Figure 1 - UK Ministry of Food ration book. Source: Imperial War Museum (EPH 1751)

The Second World War began in September 1939, when Nazi Germany’s invasion of Poland resulted in Britain and France declaring war on Germany. Based on their experiences during the First World War, the British government expected that the conflict would become a ‘Total War’, meaning that all resources of society would have to be mobilized, and that civilians would also be affected by the war. At the time, Britain was a net importer of food, which made the country particularly vulnerable to disturbances in the global food market. In order to prevent serious shortages, as early as 1936 the British Ministry of Food had begun to make plans for the supply, control and distribution of foodstuffs. In addition to making stockpiles and preparing food control policies, by the summer of 1939 the Ministry had already printed 50 million ration books, ready to be used when necessary.

The first commodity to be rationed in late 1939 was petrol, followed in January 1940 by the first foodstuffs: bacon, ham, butter, and sugar. Other products soon followed, especially foods that were normally imported or came from scarce animal sources, such as meat, cheese, margarine, eggs, milk, tea, breakfast cereals, rice, and biscuits. By mid-1942 most foodstuffs were rationed, except fresh vegetables, fruit, fish and bread. Other scarce commodities were rationed too, such as clothing, shoes, fuel, and soap.

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# Rationing in Britain during World War II

A resource for Key Stage 4



As the war progressed, the rationing system was refined to accommodate different needs. In order to ensure the fairest allocation of food possible, the Ministry of Food created classifications according to age and profession. Workers doing heavy labour were entitled to larger rations than other adult workers; children received smaller rations but relatively higher proportions of fats and proteins, and nursing or expectant mothers were entitled to larger allotments of milk and other animal-source foodstuffs. Supplementary rations were also given to the sick and people doing work that was considered to be detrimental to their health.

Rationing involved a complex purchasing system. Similar to the situation in many German-occupied countries, each person received a personal ration card with a certain number of coupons – later supplemented by a points system – that could be used at shops where they were registered. Officially, none of the rationed articles could be bought or sold without these coupons or points. Unofficially, many people also bought foods clandestinely and, in common with other countries, the black market thrived in wartime Britain.

To support the rationing scheme, in 1940 the Ministry of Food also established canteens. These so-called 'British Restaurants' were run by local authorities on a non-profit basis, and provided meals for those not able to cook at home, such as victims of the German air raids. Other canteens catered those in need of extra meals, such as factory and company workers, as well as schoolchildren. The number of school meals increased from about 160,000 before the war to 1.6 million in 1945 (about 40 per cent of the British children). These meals provided them with up to 1,000 calories a day, or half of their daily requirements.

Although rationing meant a major change for the British people, generally speaking, the wartime food policies made sure that nobody fell short of basic nutritional requirements. The main exception to this was the German-occupied Channel Islands, which suffered a severe food crisis during final months of the war and occupation.

The end of the war in May 1945 did not mean an end to rationing. Shortages persisted and bread, which had been freely available during the war, was rationed for two years from July 1946. Animal products such as cheese, bacon, ham, meat and fats as well as sugar also remained scarce. It took until mid-1954 before rationing finally ended.

## Rationing in Britain during World War II

Main discussion questions: Why was there food rationing in Britain during WWII? What was the impact of rationing on the British people, and which groups were most affected by its implementation? Use the following sources to support your argument.

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**Source 1.** Prime Minister Sir Winston S. Churchill on rationing, January 1940

We are embarking upon a widespread system of rationing. That is not because there is a danger of famine or because the Navy has not done its part in keeping open the oceans, the seas and the harbours. We are rationing ourselves because we wish to save every ton of imports, to increase our output of munitions, and to maintain and extend our export trade, thus gaining the foreign credits wherewith to buy more munitions and more materials of war, in order that the whole life-energy of the British nation and of the British Empire, and of our Allies, may be directed to the last ounce, to the last inch, to the task we have in hand. This is no time for ease and comfort. It is the time to dare and endure. That is why we are rationing ourselves, even while our resources are expanding. That is why we mean to regulate every ton that is carried across the sea and make sure that it is carried solely for the purpose of victory.

Source: 'A Time to Dare and Endure', Address given in the Free Trade Hall Manchester, 27 January 1940. Published in: R.S. Churchill (ed.), *Into Battle: Speeches by the Right Hon. Winston S. Churchill* (London 1941), 164-165.

**Source 2.** Calorie and protein intake in the UK by social class/income group, 1936-1959

The table below shows the daily consumption of calories and protein per person in the UK from 1936 to 1959. The percentage columns show the working-class intake as a percentage of the middle-class intake. Any figures under 100 mean that the working-class intake was comparatively lower.

Date	Calories (/kcal)			Protein (/gram)		
	Working Class	Middle Class	%	Working Class	Middle Class	%
1932-5	2,859	3,275	87	80	96	83
1936-7	2,557	3,159	81	70	89	79
1944	2,387	2,403	99	73	74	99
1945	2,375	2,402	99	76	77	99
1946	2,307	2,336	99	78	78	100
1947	2,308	2,307	100	77	77	100
1950	2,468	2,506	98	77	79	97
1951	2,463	2,510	98	76	78	97
1956	2,615	2,597	101	75	76	99
1959	2,564	2,636	97	73	77	95

Figure 2 - Source: Ina Zweiniger-Barbielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption 1939-1955* (Oxford 2000), 45.

**Source 3.** Daily rations (kcal) average adult consumers in nine European countries, 1941-44

Country	1941	1942	1943	1944
Germany	2,020	1,940	1,990	2,000
Protectorate*	1,950	1,875	1,800	1,760
Netherlands	1,800	1,785	1,845	1,765
Finland	1,650	1,375	1,640	1,775
Norway	1,580	1,445	1,445	1,445
Belgium	1,375	1,325	1,365	1,555
France	1,230	1,110	1,065	1,135
Poland	1,290	1,235	1,135	1,160
Italy	1,160	1,020	930	990

\*German occupied protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (modern day Czech Republic)

Figure 3 - Source: John Lindberg, *Food, Famine and Relief 1940-1946* (Geneva 1946), 21.

**Source 4.** Recipes/information brochures on how to deal with rations

**Source 4a.** Ministry of Food recipe leaflet

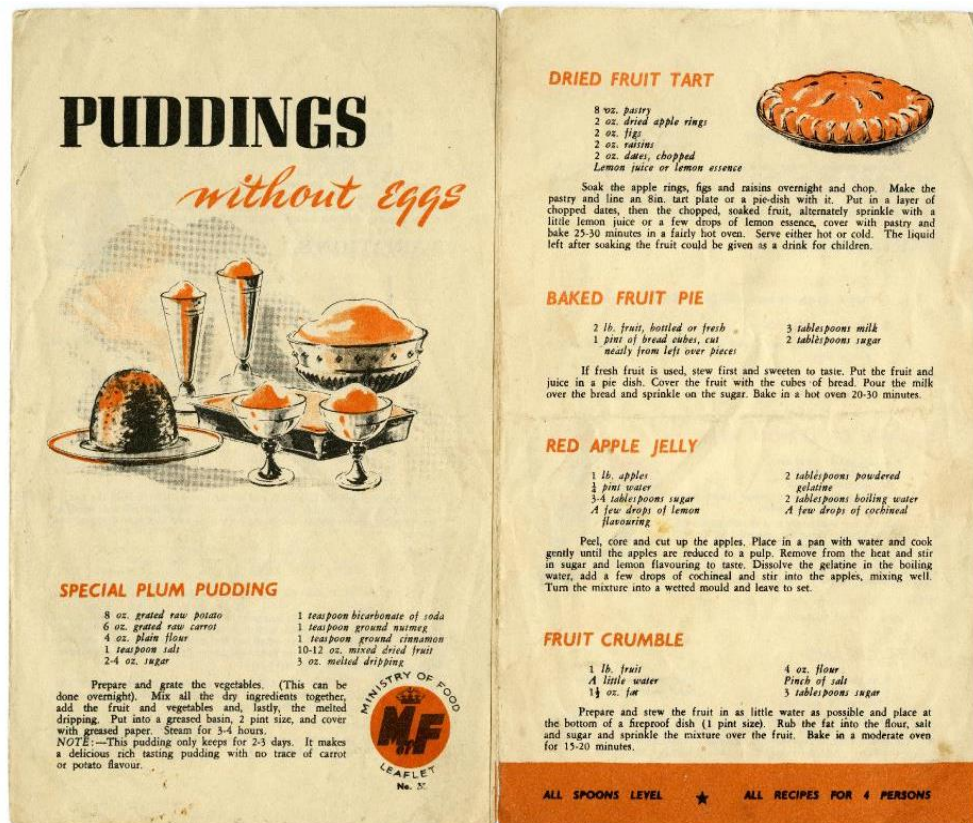


Figure 4a - Source: West Sussex Record Office (Add Mss. 54,872)

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Source 4b. Rations advertising by Sainsbury's

**VERY IMPORTANT**  
whether you usually shop  
at Sainsbury's or not.

# RATIONING

**Ration Books are now being distributed. As soon as you receive yours, whether you are a regular customer of Sainsbury's or not, you are invited to bring it to Sainsbury's for registration. During the last war, Sainsbury's fair dealing won the goodwill of every housewife. It will be the same during this war. Here are the reasons why you should decide to register at Sainsbury's.**

- 1** You can obtain all rationed, registered and "free" provisions, groceries and meat under one roof. No rushing about in black-outs and winter weather.
- 2** You are guaranteed full-ration supplies.
- 3** Everything you buy at Sainsbury's is of the best possible value.
- 4** You can rely on the Sainsbury standard of spotless cleanliness and also (because of our big turnover) on the freshness of all you buy at Sainsbury's.
- 5** You are assured of "no profiteering." We guarantee you fair prices and fair dealing.

RATIONED  
OR REGISTERED

- BUTTER
- BACON & HAM
- SUGAR

- 1** You can obtain all rationed, registered and "free" provisions, groceries and meat under one roof. No rushing about in black-outs and winter weather.
- 2** You are guaranteed full-ration supplies.
- 3** Everything you buy at Sainsbury's is of the best possible value.
- 4** You can rely on the Sainsbury standard of spotless cleanliness and also (because of our big turnover) on the freshness of all you buy at Sainsbury's.
- 5** You are assured of "no profiteering." We guarantee you fair prices and fair dealing.

UNRATIONED

- MARGARINE
- COOKING FATS
- FRESH MEAT
- POULTRY & GAME
- SAUSAGES & COOKED MEATS
- CHEESE & EGGS
- GROCERIES

*The great majority of our Branches sell all the items listed above.*

# J. SAINSBURY

*Head Office: Stamford House, Blackfriars, N.E.1*

H & C

Figure 4b - Source: The Sainsbury Archive, Museum of London Docklands (SA/WAR/2/IMA/1/7)

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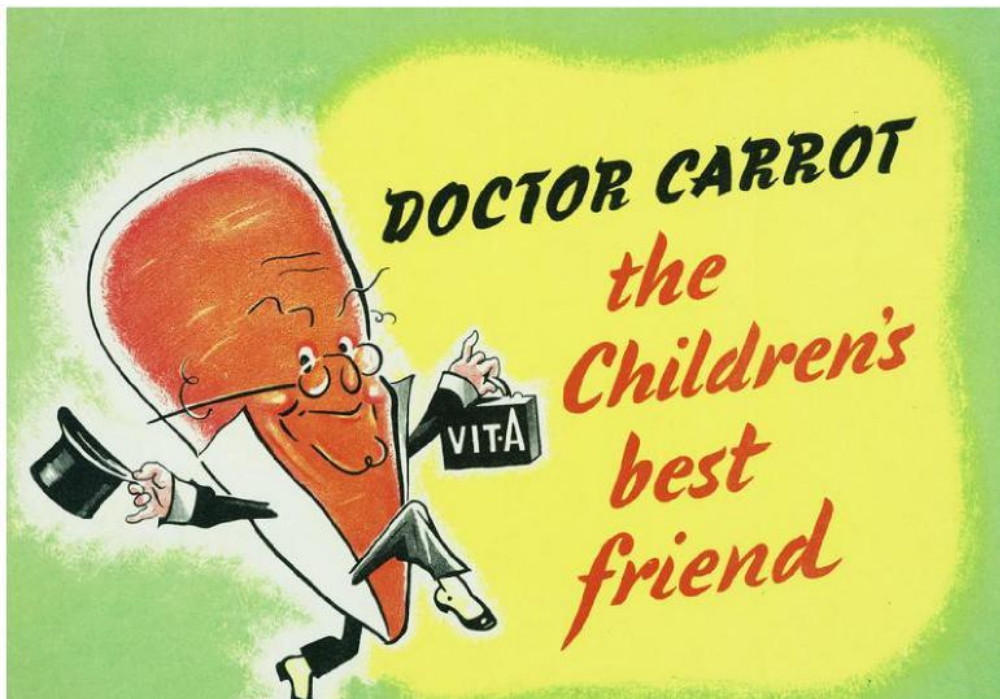
**Source 4c.** Weekly ration for two people in the United Kingdom, 1943



*Figure 4c - Source: Imperial War Museum (D 14667)*

**Source 5.** Propaganda

**Source 5a.** Propaganda poster 'Doctor Carrot: The Children's Best friend'



*Figure 5a - Imperial War Museum (Art. IWM PST 8105)*

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**Source 5b.** Propaganda video 'Rationing in Britain', 1944

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9wNJ78S2GY>

**Source 6.** Attitudes to food rationing in 1942 (in percentages)

The survey below is based on a sample of 2,047 people from different occupational, regional, sex, and age groups in the UK, interviewed between 9 and 26 June 1942. Respondents were asked, 'What do you think about food rationing?' Percentages do not add to 100 because some people gave miscellaneous answers or responded 'Don't know'.

	Approve (%)	No criticism (%)	Dissatisfied (%)
Men	50	25	19
Women	57	28	11
Under 20 years	49	26	11
31-45 years	57	24	14
Over 65 years	48	28	18
Urban	53	27	15
Rural	62	25	9
Heavy industry <sup>a</sup>	37	30	30
Heavy industry <sup>b</sup>	43	22	29
Light industry	47	34	12
Clerical and distributive	66	21	8
Professional and managerial	68	21	7
Housewives	55	29	11
Retired unoccupied	52	23	18
<i>All respondents</i>	<i>54</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>14</i>

<sup>a</sup> Factories and shipyards

<sup>b</sup> Agricultural, building and transport workers, and miners

Figure 6 - Source: Ina Zweiniger-Barbielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption 1939-*

## Questions for classroom discussion

- a. What do you think were the Ministry of Food's main considerations when devising the rationing system? How are these motivations reflected in Churchill's address (**Source 1**)?
- b. Looking at **Source 2**, what effect did the rationing system have on the level of inequality between social classes? Could you explain why?
- c. In **Source 3**, what do the differences in rationing regimes across countries and across time tell us about the dynamics of the Second World War?

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- d. What do you think is meant by 'profiteering' in **Source 4b**? Why do you think this was important?
- e. Can you identify the food groups in **Source 4c**? Why do you think they were prioritized?
- f. Looking at **Source 5a**, why do you think the Ministry of Food promoted the eating of carrots?
- g. According to **Source 5b**, how were men and women affected differently by the rationing system? Do you agree with this video?
- h. Looking at **Source 6**, how would you explain the differences in the attitudes of different groups towards rationing? Do you think this information is reliable?
- i. Do you think rationing would be possible in Britain these days? How do you think the public would react?

### Optional exercise for home

Do you know what your daily calorie and protein intake is? And where does the food you eat originate from? This is displayed on most packaging these days. Record the protein and calories of each item you eat tomorrow and compare it to the wartime diets described above.

Time of day	Item of food	Country of origin	Calories (/kcal)	Protein (/gram)
TOTAL				

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## Background for teachers

**Source 1.** Churchill delivered this address shortly after the first foodstuffs were rationed. The speech clearly shows how the people were informed that they had to endure rationing for the ultimate goal of an Allied victory, as part of the home front's contribution to the war effort.

**Source 2.** The table shows how different income groups in the UK were affected differently by the rationing. Generally speaking, middle-class food consumption standard deteriorated while the poorer sections of the working class were the main beneficiaries of the wartime policies. In sum, food rationing and control 'improved' the social class distribution of the diet by reducing the imbalances that were significantly present prior to the outbreak of the war.

**Source 3.** Comparing the situation in Britain with other European countries during the war, one observes that rations in those countries were considerably lower. This large discrepancy also resulted from the fact that in most occupied countries, unlike Britain, all foodstuffs were rationed, and not much was available to buy outside of the rationing system. In these countries, people relied much more on the black market to provide for their basic needs. The differences between occupied countries are also telling of how the Germans perceived their inhabitants. For example, the Dutch rations were only slightly lower than those in Germany and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, which is a clear indication that the 'Germanic' Dutch maintained a relatively 'privileged' position among the occupied countries and enjoyed a well-functioning rationing system. Most other occupied territories in Western and Eastern Europe had to cope with much less. For example, Belgium already had to deal with food shortage and hunger as early as the winter of 1940-41 as it was much less prepared for a self-sufficient wartime food supply. Shortages of food and other primary resources started in France in the first year of the war as well.

**Source 4a.** The Ministry of Food distributed many recipe leaflets during the war, encouraging people to make the most of their rations. To reach the masses, the Ministry also published ration recipes in the local and national press. By encouraging people to make creative use of their rations, these recipes discouraged dissatisfaction with the rationing regime, thereby improving morale. They also discouraged people from engaging with the black market.

**Source 4b.** As part of the rationing system, people were required to register with a particular shop. Consequently, shops tried to get as many registrations as possible. 'Profiteering', the unethical seeking of excessive profits, or taking advantage of the war for private gain, was seen as unpatriotic, so advertisers had to be careful to avoid this charge.

**Source 5a.** The Ministry of Food promoted the consumption of carrots, as they did not need to be imported, were easy to grow in people's gardens, and were a good source of vitamin A. British wartime propaganda popularized the myth that carrots help you see in the dark; a super-power that would have been particularly useful during the blackouts of the Blitz. Although scientists have subsequently shown that Vitamin A is beneficial for eye health, there is no truth to the claims of the propagandists.

**Source 5b.** This video is a good example of the traditional intra-household gender division. Commonly responsible for housekeeping, collecting food, and preparing meals, housewives bore the main burden of rationing.

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**Source 6.** After initial discontent with the rationing system because of shortages, high prices, and inequalities in distribution, by the end of 1941 a comprehensive system of food rationing and control was in place, which largely remained unchanged until the end of the war. As a result, most of the initial uncertainties and discontent had been overcome, and people had gradually adjusted to the new wartime diet. This table shows that more than half of the interviewees approved of rationing, and 27 per cent had no criticism at all. Only 14 per cent indicated dissatisfaction. Comparing the different groups, the table shows that women showed a slightly higher approval rate than men, and people in rural areas – the main food-producing areas – were more satisfied than city-dwellers. The most important differences are shown between occupational groups. Manual workers in heavy industry were least satisfied with food rationing, while rations were most popular among white-collar workers. This was mostly due to a widespread belief among manual workers that their diet was inadequate and that rationing was unfair for people doing heavy labour.

## About the authors

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