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Provision of Food for the Population of Polish Urban Agglomerations during the War of 1939. Plans and their Implementation on the Example of Warsaw

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Abstract

The subject of battlefield logistics security in some countries lies outside the mainstream of military historians' studies of armed conflicts in the broadest sense. This is surprising insofar as these activities almost always determine the manner and possibilities of conducting military operations. For example, this issue can be seen in the Polish literature on the defensive war of 1939. Although several comprehensive studies have been written, significant gaps remain in many areas, hindering a proper understanding of various aspects of the September 1939 fighting. One such topic is the preparation of the Polish civilian and military administration to meet the food needs of the civilian population in urban agglomerations in September 1939. The purpose of this article is to show the inadequacies of Polish preparations against the background of German efforts in this regard and to determine what effect virtualising had on the ability to conduct a prolonged and organized defense. For this purpose, the author will use the example of one of the longest-defending urban centers in September 1939, namely the Polish capital, Warsaw.

Keywords:

Food provisions, 1939 defensive war, defense of Warsaw, Polish Army.

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Organization of feeding the population of cities in the German Reich under conditions of armed conflict. Legal regulations and organizational preparations

After the end of World War I, many European countries recognized the need to develop an organized and more efficient victualling system for emergencies and war. This task took on particular importance in the German Reich after Hitler came to power. As early as September 13, 1933, a law was passed regulating the area of victualling (*Gesetz über den vorläufigen Aufbau des Reichsnährstandes und Maßnahmen zur Markt- und Preisregelung für landwirtschaftliche Erzeugnisse*), the so-called „Reichsnährstandsgesetz”, under which Walther Darré Minister of Food and Agriculture of the Reich (*Reichsminister für Ernährung und Landwirtschaft*) was given broad powers to regulate, produce and market agricultural commodities (Rodziewicz 2022, 223). Among other things, tens of thousands of local organizations of agricultural producers and processors, and more than a dozen union headquarters were merged. The following year also saw the start of construction of a state network of elevators with a capacity of 5,000 to 70,000 tons. As a result, the Reich Food Farm (*Der Reichsnährstand*) had 8.8 million tons of grain stockpiled in 1939, which could have supplied the German non-farming population with bread for more than a year (Münkel 1996, 485). At the same time, imports of animal and vegetable products were launched on a large scale, which, as early as 1935, made it possible to reduce social tensions and provide a far higher level of provisioning for the first months of the war than before. Thanks to good harvests in 1938 and 1939, supplies were also plentiful. A level of self-sufficiency in grain, potatoes, sugar, and meat was achieved. A few weeks before the outbreak of war, Germany reached a self-sufficiency rate of 83 percent, a significant increase from the 68 percent in 1928 (Volkmann 2003, 372).

In 1937, work began on developing a universal victualling system for urban agglomerations (Łuczak 1982, 282). An elaborate system of collection and distribution of foodstuffs was created, which employed 2.5 million people (Rodziewicz 2022, 235). Since the main industrial centers and state institutions were concentrated in the cities, their employees were to be assured of receiving daily food at feeding stations organized there. Pre-school and school children, on the other hand, were to receive meals at the institutions they attended. Non-working persons were to receive meals at community kitchens specially established for this purpose. The standard due included one hot meal and appropriate food allotments for breakfast and dinner. In addition, a special category of people was singled out who, among other reasons, the need to move, could not be covered by the general victualling system, and for them, food cards were designated, allowing them to purchase basic foodstuffs and prepare their own meals. The food ration cards were to be delivered by specially designated persons who were not subject to conscription (Urliński 2009, 133).

In 1938, planning work had already begun to take on a very tangible character. During the summer, work was carried out in industrial plants under the slogan

“warm food for workers,” in the course of which appropriately grouped victualling units responsible for providing food for workers were formed from plants and enterprises. Also, starting in September, the gradual implementation of collective feeding in cities for workers began (Urliński 2009, 133). Beginning in 1939, large-scale propaganda efforts were launched to familiarize the civilian population with the need to introduce collective feeding and uniform meals. Mandatory rationing, however, was not introduced after the war began. From September 1, 1939, only fat, meat, butter, milk, cheese, sugar, and jam were available on ration cards, and from September 25, additionally bread and eggs. Despite these restrictions, food rations for the civilian population were relatively high at the time, around 2,600 kcal (Volkmann 2003, 393).

It should be noted that in view of the tense food situation in the Reich, at the beginning of the aggression against Poland it was ordered in the quartermaster's directives in the army, that in the occupied enemy territory, as far as possible, full supplies for men and horses should be taken from the area. This meant basing supplies on looting conquered territory (National Archives 1939).

Plans for supplying the population of Polish cities with food in case of war and their implementation on the example of Warsaw

After Poland regained its independence in 1918, the following years brought struggles to shape the post-war borders and maintain sovereignty. While they were still going on, the economic reconstruction of the lands, extremely damaged as a result of World War I, began, as well as their unification due to more than a century of partition history. The scale of the challenges facing the authorities of this emerging state from non-being was enormous. In addition, the geopolitical situation already in place after the formation of the borders necessitated the maintenance of a large military. The Versailles order was not sustainable, and the threat from both the West and the East was real. The deterioration of the international situation in the second half of the 1930s led to an even more radical re-evaluation in the policy of the authorities of the time and an increase in military capabilities, and consequently, the importance of economic matters oriented in terms of state defense increased. As a result, in 1936, the Committee for the Defense of the Republic (KOR) was established, which, through its secretariat - SeKOR, headed by Brig. Gen. Tadeusz Malinowski, was to coordinate the preparation of the state's war-economic potential in the event of an impending armed conflict. However, in March 1936, in a study entitled “Provisioning for War”, a group of military specialists warned the public opinion that no coordinated work had been carried out so far on providing provisions for the population and armed forces in time of war, and that it was urgent to begin developing appropriate plans (Urliński 2009, 115).

In interwar Poland, free trade was the primary form of procurement of needed materials and food. However, this system could not work under wartime conditions, so for emergencies, including war, it was decided to introduce rationed supplies for selected products supplemented by free market sales. Obtaining the necessary mass of products to cover the needs of the rationed market and the army required the introduction of benefits in kind. On the basis of statutory regulations in this regard, plans were drawn up in the second half of the 1930s: the victualling of the armed forces „Apr. IV” and the victualling of the civilian population „Apr. IX”.

According to the first, the quartermaster authorities of the Polish Army were to accumulate food supplies in depots and warehouses for 8 days of fighting, which together with the supply of soldiers’ starting equipment (5 days together with 2 days of “R” rations) was to be sufficient for a total of 15 days of warfare. After this period, the victualling of the combatants should be fully ensured by the civilian authorities, although it is worth noting that from the tenth day after the announcement of mobilization, the army could use the supplies accumulated in warehouses filled by the civil administration ([Sulisławski 1939, 5](#)). This system, however, was not adapted to the maneuvering nature of operations in the coming conflict and, due to the rapid loss of areas that served as supply bases and the dramatic outright shortage of wheeled and rail transportation, further paralyzed by aviation operations, it did not work well in the 1939 defensive war. Nevertheless, the development of plans for the provisioning of the civilian population and their implementation presented a much worse picture.

Poland was an agricultural country, and for this reason, in terms of provisioning, the rural population was considered fully self-sufficient. The population of small cities and towns was treated similarly. Only large urban agglomerations were to be covered by the victualling plans. Supply rationing and normalization of consumption according to previously developed standards and recommendations were to be introduced. To this end, in February 1938, an Undersecretariat of State was created in the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform (MARD) to deal with all the country’s victualling matters, and the creation of victualling offices in large agglomerations began ([Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej 1938](#)). The Ministry of Internal Affairs, realizing the delays in this regard, intended to develop an ad hoc plan very quickly, followed by the aforementioned “Apr. IX” basic plan.

In late June/early July 1938, Deputy Minister in the Ministry of Internal Affairs Michał Wierusz-Kowalski sent a document with the title “Guidelines for Developing Materials for Provisioning Cities” to all provincial governors for distribution to city mayors. In it, a general planning concept was defined, and the need to assess the needs, the possibility of covering them, and the distribution of food by existing provisioning cells was expressed. To this end, eight groups of issues were identified around which work was to be conducted:

1. population of the city;
2. current size of annual consumption of each product;

3. share of each mode of transport in deliveries to the city of a particular product;
4. general conditions characterizing the supply capacity of the city;
5. characteristics of the collection and distribution apparatus;
6. characteristics of technical equipment;
7. processing;
8. characteristics of stocks held in warehouses ([Dokumenty Sekretariatu Obrony Rzeczypospolitej 1938](#), Ref. I.303.13.74).

In order to determine in detail which cities and industrial and suburban centers are to be included in the victualling plan and which cities are to be supplied outside the victualling plan, a preliminary classification of all cities and industrial and suburban centers was made in the Ministry of the Interior. It was initially assumed that cities with a population of more than 50,000 might run out of food under wartime conditions, and there would be a need for local governments to support subsistence needs. However, finally in the summer of 1938, a division of urban agglomerations into three groups was adopted: Group I included those cities with a population of more than 100,000, which were to have victualing offices (branches) established, pursuant to a circular of the Ministry of Internal Affairs dated March 28, 1938. Group II included those cities with a population of less than 100,000, which were important industrial, commercial, administrative, etc., centers, and were located in agricultural districts with insufficient productivity to supply these cities. The basic form of supplying rationed materials in both of these groups of cities was to be the card system. In contrast, cities outside Groups I and II constituted Group III. Supplying these cities was to be done outside of the victualling plan being developed ([Dokumenty Sekretariatu Obrony Rzeczypospolitej 1939](#), Ref. I.303.13.74).

According to surviving documents, it appears that materials at the level of city boards were to be prepared by October 1938. However, on September 9th, further "Guidelines for developing the degree of victualling security of the city" were published. (Urlinski 123 and 124). They ordered city boards, among other things, to take into account that under wartime conditions it would not be possible to transport food products by rail, and that wheeled deliveries of certain products would be reduced by half. For this reason, municipal victualling authorities were to dispose of supplies in previously prepared warehouses and depots. They also specified the norm of daily consumption per capita: rye flour 225 g, wheat flour - 50 g, meat 100 g, edible fats 40 g, potatoes - 500 g, legumes - 50 g, groats 50 g, sugar 25 g, eggs - 0.5 pieces, milk 0.1 l, coal - 5 kg, firewood 0.15 kg, soap 5 g ([Dokumenty Sekretariatu Obrony Rzeczypospolitej 1938](#), Ref. I.303.13.74).

The compilation of basic data at the level of municipal boards was very slow. For this reason, by a decision of the Ministry of Military Affairs on April 26th, 1939, professional cadres were sent to government and local administration offices to serve as victualling inspectors ([Dokumenty Sekretariatu Obrony Rzeczypospolitej 1939](#),

Ref. I.303.13.74). However, due to the shortage of specialized intendant officers, this decision was carried out only in part and did not significantly affect the work on victualling preparations underway in urban centers. The poor state of preparations in this regard was even reported in the press in the summer of 1939. As a result of this, as well as growing Polish-German tensions, on July 27th, the Ministry of the Interior drafted further guidelines, "Provisional Guidelines for the Preparation and Operation of the City Supply Plan," and on August 7th, 1939. "Guidelines for Governors on the Preparation and Launch of the City Supply Plan" (Urliński 2009, 126). According to them, victualling food products covered by the state-wide plan were subject to standardization. Products in free or controlled circulation were to reach the civilian population through municipal victualling bodies, as a result of stockpiling or commercial activities. The plan was not to be fully activated until the fifth week after mobilization was announced. The guidelines also included an organizational chart of the victualling bodies for cities in Groups I and II. At the head was the mayor of the city, who, upon the announcement of general mobilization or the outbreak of war, established a Provisioning Department or Branch. This was an administrative body responsible for the basic elements related to the functioning of the city's victualling apparatus. The mayor also established the City Provisioning Department, which included cooperative and private establishments. It was responsible for carrying out the tasks provided for in the state-wide plan, as well as in the local plan. In addition, a separate group of tasks was envisaged to be carried out by representatives of the urban community, organized into the Provisioning Committee, which was to serve as a liaison between the population and representatives of the municipal provisioning apparatus (Urliński 2009, 129-132).

Despite numerous initiatives and months of formal and legal preparations, most organizational activities, including stockpiling, were implemented in urban centers only in the summer of 1939, in addition, in a manner that was not coordinated with the plans, tasks, and needs of the Polish Army.

At the outbreak of World War II, Warsaw was the only city in Poland with a population of more than 1 million (about 1 million 300,000). The Vistula, one of the country's two largest rivers, flowing through it, divides it in half. The capital, located in the center of the country, was a major political and administrative center, as well as the most important railroad hub. Originally, there were no plans to defend it. For this reason, the main tasks of the District Corps Command No. I (DOK I) for the duration of the conflict were primarily to carry out mobilization activities and to supply war material and food to the two, and in time, even four all-military armies fighting in the west of the country, several hundred kilometers away from the city. In accordance with the nationwide victualling plan, during the first two weeks of hostilities, the quartermaster's office of DOK I was to organize ongoing supplies of meat and soldiers' bread to the front. The daily demand for bread alone for the two armies thus amounted to 330,000 to 350,000 loaves, which had to be baked, transported to railroad stations, transported to the supply area, and then properly distributed, and all this under combat conditions (Jasiński 2024, 182). At

the beginning of September, victualling activities proceeded smoothly, but very soon with the advance of the German army, bombardments paralyzing both the capacity of communication routes and destroying rolling stock and manufacturing centers, as well as piling up difficulties with communications, by the end of the first decade of September, the ability of the Warsaw intendant's office to victual armies fighting in the field was almost completely reduced (Jasiński and Wesołowski 2023, 233-236)).

September 3rd, 1939. Commander-in-Chief Edward Smigly-Rydz ordered Minister of Military Affairs Maj. Gen. Tadeusz Kasprzycki to organize the defense of the middle Vistula River, including Warsaw. This included securing the city also in terms of the intendant. And all this in a situation of enormous chaos, which consisted of the ordered evacuation to the east of civilian and military authorities, as well as institutions, hospitals, etc., with the simultaneous buildup in the city of manpower from military units that had been broken up in the course of fighting and retreating, as well as civilian refugees seeking refuge in the capital.

At the beginning of the second decade of September, the Army "Warsaw" of Maj. Gen. Juliusz Rommel, which was formed to defend the capital region, had about 180,000 soldiers in supply. At that time it had the following supplies accumulated by the intendant's organs: rusks, tinned meat, tinned coffee, cigarettes and salt were estimated at 600 thousand servings; bread flour, together with rye, was estimated at 2,500 tons; thanks to daily deliveries of cattle, the number of livestock ranged from 170 to 500 head, and wounded horses from 200 to 500 head; the amount of groats, flour for seasoning was estimated at 150 tons, and rice at 500 tons; sugar in the depot at Jagiellońska Street 56 was 300 tons, and 500 tons in the Prague port depot; fresh lard and canned smoked pork fat were about 150 tons, plus 100 tons of bacon (Jasiński and Wesołowski 2023, 240). It is estimated that with the transport immobilized at the Warsaw railroad stations, the accumulated supplies could have allowed, under ideal conditions, to provide food for the army for about 30-40 days.

The food supply situation for the civilian population was much worse. Preparations undertaken by the Warsaw Municipal Board before the war were not developed on a large scale, although even so, against the background of other large agglomerations, activities in this regard were undertaken as early as June 1939, and not, for example, as in Vilnius, only in mid-September 1939, when the defensive war was already *de facto* lost. Purchases of meat, fats, and coal were then begun. The population was ordered to stockpile food for several weeks of fighting. However, the largest warehouses and stores were outside the control of city officials, managed by cooperatives and private individuals.

In the first days of fighting, apart from the rise in prices and long queues of the population standing for necessities, there were no problems with food availability. On September 5th, the Capital's Social Self-Help Committee was established. The Purchasing Section, operating within its framework, efficiently distributed to the

neediest population products received from the City Supply Department or from donations and subsequent requisitions ([Rydzewska 1970](#), 49-50). At the same time, the Warsaw Workers' Social Welfare Committee was also established, which, among other things, was to provide for the care of children and workers' families and to carry out work related to supplying the population with necessities. In view of the impossibility of printing and allocating supply cards, the distribution of rationed goods was handled primarily by the then-created block organizations of the Anti-Aircraft Defense, working closely with the relevant organizational cells of the city. In addition, ad hoc kitchens were organized in the gates of houses using spirit and kerosene machines, on which soups and other dishes were cooked ([Milewski 1941](#), 56).

On September 8th, the first German troops arrived near Warsaw. After unsuccessful attempts to capture it on the march, operations were launched to encircle the city, which interrupted the previous possibility of supplying the city from outside. At the same time, the Germans carried out intensive aerial bombardments and increased artillery fire with each passing day, leading to numerous fires in warehouses, processing plants, bakeries, and stores, significantly reducing both military and civilian food supplies. The imminent threat from German troops caused many private owners to close their stores. With an acute shortage of transportation and the concentration of many supplies in right-bank Warsaw's Praga district, this posed quite a logistical challenge. Therefore, in the situation of the city's underdeveloped victualling apparatus, by the end of the first decade of September, the civilian population in the center of the city began to experience food shortages. This was met with an immediate reaction from the authorities and an order to open stores under the threat of forcible seizure, but also to carry out forced requisitions. Military transport columns drove day and night to decentralize the supplies they had and support the city authorities in this regard as well.

Despite a temporary improvement in the situation, the supply difficulties of both the combatants and the civilian population deepened. This prompted the commander of the "Warsaw" Army to convene a briefing with commanders and the mayor of the city of Warsaw, Stefan Starzynski, who had been acting as Civil Commissioner since September 8th. During the meeting, it was decided to reduce food standards for the army by half with regard to bread and meat. It was also decided to introduce strict control and records of food stocks at the disposal of the city and to disclose all food stocks. The responsible body for overseeing this was the Civil Guard. In turn, the Head of Provisioning at the Civil Commissar, established at that time, began working closely with the army from September 12th in organizing transportation, carrying out requisitions, but also relayed the needs of the civilian population, to whom the army began supplying the following from its warehouses: flour, sugar and rice. Faced with a shortage of meat and a surplus of military horses, the army began returning 200 to 300 wounded horses to the slaughterhouse on a daily basis, and the meat thus obtained was distributed to the population through administrative bodies ([Braclawski-Herman 1944](#), 4-5).

In mid-September, city authorities identified increasing incidents of looting and plundering not only of property, but also of food supplies. This procedure, despite resolute counteraction, due to its scale and the thinness of the forces possible to maintain law and order, continued to a limited extent until the fighting ended. However, it did not remain unaffected by the management of supplies. On September 16th, the Civil Commissar issued an order, affecting primarily the immigrant population, to limit the consumption in public eating establishments to one meal a day. This was to be “nutritious soup.” Exceeding this standard was punishable by a hefty fine or three months’ imprisonment, or even both at once (Płoski 1964, 78). Confectioneries, on the other hand, dispensed tea or black coffee with buns or rusks.

At the turn of the second and third decades of September, changes were once again made in food rations for the army. The largest rations were set for combat troops and the wounded. Reduced access to food was also felt by the civilian population. Huge queues standing in front of food stores did not spread even during smaller German raids, which often resulted in casualties. The issue of water availability was even worse. As a result of days of bombardment and artillery shelling during the defense, the street sewer system was damaged in a total of 586 places. In addition, 406 damages were found in water supply connections to properties. In turn, as a result of direct hits on September 24th on the Filter Station and the City Power Plant that day, the supply of electricity and water to end users in Warsaw ceased completely (Płoski 1964, 410-411). The few wells could not suffice for the civilian population and the army, so water had to be drawn from the Vistula River (Furmański 1945).

In view of the complete encirclement of the city by the German army and the exhaustion of artillery ammunition, persistence in defense in a city of more than a million inhabitants, daily shelled and bombarded from the air, led to further material losses and further casualties of the civilian population, which was increasingly painfully affected by problems of provisions and lack of medicine. For this reason, on the afternoon of September 26, the Warsaw Defense Command decided to stop fighting and begin capitulation talks with the Germans. On September 28, the Polish capital capitulated. A day later, in a proclamation from the commander of the “Warsaw” Army, Gen. Juliusz Rómmel informed the people of Warsaw: “Today, on my order, the army defending Warsaw and Modlin capitulates due to the exhaustion of ammunition, food, and lack of water. [...] Warsaw has done its duty. The war continues and I firmly believe that victory will be on our side” (Płoski 1964, 133). In accordance with the terms of the capitulation agreement, in the following days after taking control of the city, the German authorities proceeded to distribute bread and hot meals to the population.

Summary

Interwar Poland was a poor country, facing enormous social and economic problems. Therefore, despite the difficult geopolitical position and the growing threat from the German Reich and the Soviet Union, many projects aimed at securing the

state and its citizens were implemented slowly and inadequately. Unlike the solutions introduced in the German Reich, the issues of problems related to providing provisions for the Polish civilian population during emergencies and war, although accurately diagnosed by the authorities, despite the measures implemented, were not fully and systemically resolved in time. Actions taken by local authorities in the last weeks before the explosion only partially ensured the food security of the population. In Warsaw, it was only thanks to the dedication of thousands of officials led by President Stefan Starzynski, community activists, and also thanks to the supplies accumulated by the army that the specter of starvation was dismissed. In the accounts of the defenders, the food shortage was very often noted. It was pointed out that, although this had a significant impact on the collapse of the morale of the population, the army showed an unwavering will to fight until the end. According to the Polish command, however, further defense was pointless. Faced with a shortage of artillery ammunition, hopes for outside help, and the situation of the civilian population deteriorating with each passing day due to German bombardments and problems with provisions, the Warsaw Defense Command finally decided to capitulate. The issue of the city's victualing was therefore one factor, though certainly not the key one, under whose influence Warsaw capitulated on September 28th, 1939. However, if there was still a political and military sense to the fighting, the issue of ensuring the city's victualling would have been the factor that determined the possibility and length of its duration.

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