

# The German Home Front 1943

Unlike the occupied countries of Europe and Britain, the people of Germany at the end of 1942 had not felt the full brunt of the war. The exploitation of occupied areas meant that much food and many materials went into Germany, helping to feed the population and preventing shortages of consumer goods. The importation of slave workers from occupied countries had also prevented the widespread use of women in the German war effort.

1943 however was a turning point, as military defeats, notably at Stalingrad, began to limit the flow of goods and raw materials. A situation that was made worse by the increasing Allied aerial bombardment disrupting supply lines and transportation.

In the aftermath of defeat at Stalingrad, which marked the turning point of the war on the eastern front, the Nazi propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels made a speech at the Sportplatz in Berlin on February 18th 1943 in which he now asked the German people if they were prepared for total war. Up until then Hitler had been reluctant to put the German people on a total war footing for fear of losing their support.

Albert Speer was appointed Armaments Minister with instructions to redirect the German economy totally to war production.

Although rationing had been in place since 1939 because of the sea blockade by the Allies, Hitler had not wished to implement it too strictly for fear of affecting public support for the war. By 1943 shortages were becoming evermore severe. Ration cards had been introduced but the system of rationing was not always applied uniformly throughout the country. Some items had by 1943 simply become unavailable, notably coffee; so substitutes were found, for example roasted grains or nuts. Fresh food was also becoming scarce, especially in the cities, as the Allied bombing disrupted supply lines.

A larger proportion of the German workforce was required to work in agriculture, 27% as opposed to 5% in Britain. Shortages of labour therefore had a greater impact on food production. Albert Speer tried to rectify this by proclaiming that all women aged 17 - 45 had to register for work. Women under 25 had to work in agriculture. Out of a total of

3 million German women only 1 million actually registered for work and of these only 400,000 were employed. The employers and the Nazi hierarchy preferred to 'employ' slave labour as a cheaper option. The appalling, brutal conditions under which they were forced to work not surprisingly meant productivity was low. By 1943 21% of the German workforce was foreign.

As the bombing became more intensive in German cities, and more male teachers were called up for active service, school children were removed from city schools and transferred to hostels in the country run by the Nazi youth movement. The education provided was spasmodic and of varying quality.

1943 also saw home leave for most German soldiers severely curtailed as the military situation worsened.

On coming to power in 1933 the Nazis had realised the power of the media as a means of gaining the support of the population. Propaganda Minister Goebbels nationalised German radio, controlling its content and forbidding the population to listen to foreign stations. The penalty for this could be execution. Thus when the Second World War started in 1939 opinion in Germany had been largely unified, and this was further reinforced by Nazi control of the cinema. Up until 1943 therefore no divergent views were aired in the media. However the gradual worsening of life on the German home front encouraged viewpoints that challenged the Nazi supremacy. Goebbels tried to mitigate this by increasing the variety of programmes on German radio with less of an emphasis on political and current affairs.

From 1943 onwards views divergent from Nazi doctrine increased. It was a situation made worse by the growing self-imposed isolation of Hitler from his people. When he did make public speeches they were often to an invited audience of Nazi faithfuls; speeches to the German public via the radio became extremely rare, and then all he was able to do was repeat the rhetoric that the people must work harder and be prepared to suffer sacrifices for the 'eventual German victory'.

For the German people 1943 was the year when the effects of the war became more apparent, affecting and disrupting their daily lives in many ways. The situation was to get progressively worse as Germany's

position in the war became increasingly desperate, so by the end of the war Allied bombing had ensured a huge number of homeless civilians in the destroyed or badly damaged cities. For many there was little food and fuel, and generally the fabric that had held German society together was beginning to break down.