

Rationing in World War II:

How World War II affected American citizens through daily sacrifice for their Country

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Across a seemingly endless ocean, far away from their beloved home country, American soldiers fought bravely for their nation in the Second World War. They battled the cruelty and racism of Hitler and the dangerous Nazi party, standing up for true American values of racial justice and toleration. Their victory was uncertain, but they pushed through their hardships and the uncertainties of what lie ahead, and they fought on with unmatched courage. The war caused fifty million deaths in the six years that it raged, including civilian, soldier, and Jewish casualties. These statistics name World War II the most massive armed conflict in history, and America held a part in deciding this title with the influential casualties that it inflicted. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt led the United States through these bloody years of war, making key decisions that changed the course of the war for average American citizens.<sup>1</sup> The American soldiers battled bravely for their country, but they were not the only ones fighting.

World War II was an example of a war that impacted, involved, and changed the lifestyle of not only the soldiers that fought for the United States, but also the average citizens back on the home front, who were willing to sacrifice anything to help their country to sustain a victory over their opponents. Back in the United States, average citizens were fighting the battle along with the soldiers overseas, doing what they could to ensure an American victory and restored peace. They did not fight with weapons, however, they fought with the everyday items that their very lives depended on. The government issued strict rules and regulations for the public to follow, known as the rationing system, just so that American troops overseas in Germany could get enough to eat. The rationing system that the government used during World War II was called the "Point rationing system." This particular system ensured that every American citizen got an

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<sup>1</sup> "World War II (1939-1945)." *World War II (1939-1945)*. N.p., n.d. Web. 26 Oct. 2016.

equal amount of ration points to spend on daily necessities.<sup>2</sup> Processed and canned foods were rationed for soldiers because they could easily be shipped without fear of spoiling, unlike fresh produce and fruits. In other words, anything in a jar, frozen, canned, dried, or bottled was rationed.<sup>3</sup> The citizens sacrificed not only their food, but also everyday items such as their rubber, metal, and scrap paper. They changed their lifestyles to accommodate to the shortages by replacing rationed foods with common foods, and conserving products by limiting their usage. Some citizens joined the war effort by taking their efforts a step further, and organizing collection drives for scraps that could be recycled and later used to make military supplies. Everyone found some way to help, even if it meant making drastic sacrifices to their everyday lifestyles. The entire country was involved in the war effort.

Foremost, World War II had an affect on average American citizens because it impacted their daily lives through the rationing system. The government issued each United States citizen a series of ration books, which were official booklets with ration stamps inside. Each stamp was a form of currency for a specific food item that was being rationed, such as meat, canned foods, dried foods, and juices. Blue stamps were used for the purchase of canned fruits or vegetables, and red stamps were used for purchasing meat products. The stamps had number and letter sequences on them, the number representing the point value of the stamp, and the letter representing the rationing period that the stamp was to be used in. The rationing periods were

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<sup>2</sup> By 1943, It Had Become Every Citizen's Duty to Cut Back on Meat, Sugar, Coffee, Canned Foods, Fuel, Shoes, and Consumer Goods — so "they'll Have Enough." "World War II on the Home Front: Rationing." *Rationing* -. N.p., n.d. Web. 31 Oct. 2016.

<sup>3</sup> By 1943, It Had Become Every Citizen's Duty to Cut Back on Meat, Sugar, Coffee, Canned Foods, Fuel, Shoes, and Consumer Goods — so "they'll Have Enough." "World War II on the Home Front: Rationing." *Rationing* -. N.p., n.d. Web. 31 Oct. 2016.

allotted time periods when only stamps that were specific to that ration period could be used in.<sup>4</sup> Mr. Parke Mellinger stated after being asked what the food rations were like, “Well, it didn’t affect people in the country here, we raised pigs down here, we had. . . we had chickens, and so we had meat and we had a garden, so people in the country are not affected by rationing too much, be mostly sugar, and things like that that you couldn’t produce or sell, so it wasn’t all that bad.”<sup>5</sup> [Sic] Because Mellinger was living on a farm during the rationing period, he and his family were fortunate enough to have fresh produce from their garden and extra meat from their livestock. For citizens who did not have this advantage, food, especially fresh produce, was very limited. However, these people planted Victory Gardens in the small planting areas that they had. The Victory Gardens were small gardens that were usually planted in window boxes, backyard lots, and even on apartment rooftops. The gardens provided extra food for hungry civilians, and became so popular that statistics show twenty million Victory Gardens were planted across the entire United States at their peak during World War II.<sup>6</sup> In order to increase the popularity of Victory gardens and the preserving of homegrown food, the government distributed pamphlets and sent out Agricultural Extension agents to teach Americans how to can their own food. Women who canned their food could receive an additional sugar ration if they submitted an application to the government. The women were required to clarify the amount that they planned to preserve, and promise to can four quarts of fruit per every additional pound of sugar given to

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<sup>5</sup> Mellinger, Parke. Personal interview with the author. Lancaster, PA. October 4, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> “Victory Gardens at a Glance: Fun Facts about Victory Gardens.” *National World War Two History Museum*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Oct. 2016.

them.<sup>7</sup> United States citizens were influential and vital to the war effort because of the way their lives were impacted by the rationing system.

Secondly, the course of World War II was affected greatly by rationing because of the way that involved United States citizens in the war effort. Although food was the item that was most needed by the soldiers overseas, other items were also rationed and considered valuable to the war. Everyday household items such as rubber, oil, kerosene, gas, scrap metal, scrap paper, and waste cooking fats were collected for military use. Because rubber was needed for wartime purposes, citizens were asked to turn in old garden hoses, tires, raincoats, gloves, and rubber shoes. Oil and kerosene were also conserved and used by the army to fuel their vehicles and equipment, and gas rationing was enforced in order to not only conserve gas for military use, but also to prolong the life of the rubber tires on the vehicles. The military need for rubber and gasoline drastically limited the transportation of fresh produce in order to conserve fuel and the precious rubber on the tires. Some cases show that in the later years of the rationing restrictions, some had to line their old, worn tires with newspaper so that they would last longer. The government also imposed gasoline ration stamps, which were worth only three to five gallons of gas per week. In order to prevent hoarding of gasoline, the stamps were printed with numbers on them, and these numbers matched the sticker number on the vehicle's windshield. Americans were asked to only use their gasoline ration for necessary trips, such as to the doctor, or church, or the grocery store.<sup>8</sup> Scrap metal such as chicken wire, unessential car parts, and metal items

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were collected and melted down, so that more military equipment such as tanks and boats could be produced. Some civilians, mainly school children and community groups, set up “scrap metal drives.”<sup>9</sup> At these drives, Americans could drop off their excess metal and other such materials that were of value to the military. This provided a way that Americans could provide additional assistance to the war effort and become more involved in providing military supplies to the soldiers troops overseas. Paper, too, was collected and used to pack military equipment and supplies for shipping. Even extra fats from the meat rations were put to use, as they were deposited by local butchers at rendering plants and recycled into explosives.<sup>10</sup> Mellinger remembers how the involvement of United States citizens in the war effort also made it difficult to buy household appliances. “. . . Rationing. . . came home to me because we got married, just before the war started, and built a house. . . and we couldn’t get a refrigerator, and we couldn’t get a stove, we couldn’t get a radio. . .”<sup>11</sup> [Sic] Mellinger encountered these difficulties because the manufacturing of household goods came to a stop at the start of the war, only to be replaced by military equipment manufacturing businesses. As a result of this, many Americans lost their jobs at the start of the war. World War II, specifically, was a war that greatly involved the average American citizen, and it provided many ways in which they could demonstrate their support.

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<sup>10</sup> By 1943, It Had Become Every Citizen’s Duty to Cut Back on Meat, Sugar, Coffee, Canned Foods, Fuel, Shoes, and Consumer Goods — so “they’ll Have Enough.” "World War II on the Home Front: Rationing." *Rationing* -. N.p., n.d. Web. 31 Oct. 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Mellinger, Parke. Personal interview with the author. Lancaster, PA. October 4, 2016.

Lastly, the rationing system of World War II changed the lifestyle of citizens living on the home front during the course of the Second World War. Food rationing in the United States started out as only a voluntary act of service, known as voluntary rationing. This form of rationing was only used in the first year of the war, for in the second year, and following until the end of World War II, and increased demand for supplies and food for soldiers overseas caused the government to enforce very strict rules and regulations on the rationing of rare items. Sugar was the first item to be rationed because the war caused imports from the Philippines and Hawaii to be cut off. The ships that had formerly carried the sugar were diverted to military purposes, causing Americans to suddenly learn to live and cook without the use of sugar. Meat was another food item that was in very short supply. The government issued civilians ration stamps for two and one half pounds of red meat to every adult per week. But, because of the great lack of meat in the United States during World War II, some grocers were unable to sell that amount. As a result of this, many families experienced a “meatless Christmas” in the year of 1942.<sup>12</sup> If a citizen had a health issue and could not comply with the rationed quota of food, they had to write an application to the government, explaining their problem with the allotted rations and requesting additional rations. If the government agreed with the request, the citizen was eligible to receive extra food.<sup>13</sup> “Yeah, people in the city, that was a . . . had to be real careful with their stamps, ” Mellinger recalls. “There was supposed to be enough stamps to keep you going. You got one for each member of the family. . .”<sup>14</sup> [Sic] Every United States citizen, including

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<sup>13</sup> {, By. “PRIMARY SOURCES: RATIONING.” *The National WWII Museum*. N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Nov. 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Mellinger, Parke. Personal interview with the author. Lancaster, PA. October 4, 2016.

children, were issued forty eight ration points to spend for the duration of every ration period, and the stamps, or points, expired at the close of a ration period. These regulations helped to prevent hoarding and the buying of excess or unnecessary products. Another way that the government avoided hoarding was through the identification and personal information on the back of the ration books. Each ration book was not permitted to be traded, bought, or stolen, and in order to enforce this, the government required that each recipient of a ration book record their name, age, height, weight, and sex on their ration books. Grocers were required to check this information before letting a civilian purchase any rationed goods. Homemakers were asked to pledge their support and commitment to the rationing system by reciting, “I pay no more than top legal prices. I accept no rationed goods without giving up ration stamps.”<sup>15</sup> In order to keep the cost of living affordable for average Americans during the World War II period, the government combined price controls with rationing. The price controls limited the amount of money that a grocer could charge for certain items, since the customer had to pay for the item in the money amount as well as the ration stamp amount.<sup>16</sup> This was a change to the World War I rationing system, where the cost of living for many Americans was much higher than most could manage. Americans were encouraged to share rides through posters boasting titles such as, “You Ride Alone, You Ride With Hitler.”<sup>17</sup> The government promoted rationing and military support by displaying posters and signs that showed how civilians’ supplies were benefiting American

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<sup>17</sup> By 1943, It Had Become Every Citizen’s Duty to Cut Back on Meat, Sugar, Coffee, Canned Foods, Fuel, Shoes, and Consumer Goods — so “they’ll Have Enough.” “World War II on the Home Front: Rationing.” *Rationing* -. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Oct. 2016.



troops, providing new ways of supporting the war effort, and peer pressuring United States citizens into doing more to support the war effort. Rationing changed the average American's lifestyle during the World War II period, thus affecting their lives through the sacrifices that they had to make.

Hence, the rationing system of World War II caused average American citizens to be impacted, involved, and changed through the sacrifices and shortages that they experienced. The daily items that they depended on were needed by soldiers overseas in Germany, so they willingly gave up their main food staples, as well as common household appliances and luxuries. Mellinger sums up his take on the rationing system after being asked how the public felt about the rationing system, and what he felt was the hardest aspect of the rationing. "Oh, they complained like everything else, about everything. . . . But, uh, the idea of us moving into a brand new house, and fixing it up and then couldn't get appliances, that was the worst thing that really bothered us." <sup>18</sup> [Sic] Mellinger voices his take on the rationing system and explains that although it posed some difficulty to shoppers and consumer businesses, American citizens were happy to be helping their country through rationing, and they benefited from their difficult experiences with qualities such as thankfulness, humility, and increased awareness for others' needs. Those loyal citizens not only changed the course of the war and the quality of living for American soldiers, but also their own outlook on the bounty that we as Americans are fortunate enough to experience today.

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<sup>18</sup> Mellinger, Parke. Personal interview with the author. Lancaster, PA. October 4, 2016.

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