

Report of the Famine and Hyperinflation of 1816 and 1817

A report by Mayor David Friedrich Lederer* of 17 August 1817. From the Bürger-und Notabilienbuch

[Translator's note: A powerful eruption of the Indonesian volcano Tambora (1815) was followed by one to two years of unusually cold climate around the world. In Europe, harvests were either late or failed altogether, grain prices peaked and famine was widespread. During the summer of 1816, the USA experienced a widespread snowfall. The years 1816, 1817 and 1818 had some of the coldest Northern Hemisphere summers on record. Mayor Lederer no doubt had no idea of the underlying cause of the famine he describes below.]

As a result of bad harvests, Southwest Germany experienced severe famine in 1816-1817. The agricultural distress reached its high point in 1817. The worst could be averted only by grain imports. Thousands of Wüttembergers emigrated to escape the misery. Prices for food stuff increased two to five fold. The King and government took pains to alleviate the need by all means. Mayor Lederer reports:

Geradstetten d. 17 Aug. 1817

Already in the months of June and July of 1816, grain costs rose to such high levels that one Schefel [“scoop,” a unit of measure] of wheat cost 11 fl, and by harvest time 14-15 fl. What the cause of this was, is this, the seeds suffered damage from the many mice the previous Autumn and sprouted very thinly, whereupon followed a stormy winter with little snow cover, which blew away the seeds in the lower and upper lying fields of our town, so that many of them had to replanted.

The summer of 1816 was just as bad, so that as a result of long and lingering moisture, the grain did not thrive and was taken over by grass, and what increased the problem was that the fodder and hay and Öhmd grass, because of the 15 to 20 times that the Rems flooded to such a devastating degree, was so ravaged that the cattle feeding from this in the following spring got sick and listless, so that many of them had to be slaughtered.

In that summer, with the sun shining only half the day, thunderstorms brought forth the worst weather, so that one could say a quarter or even a third of the grain was ruined throughout the state, the weather also caused the potatoes to rot in the ground, and in many towns you could not harvest as many potatoes as you planted, similarly it went in the vineyards, where the grapes did not ripen, the same fate befell the high hills as well as the high meadow, and in many towns, because of the arrival of an early winter, the grapes had to be left on the vine without harvesting.

The vineyards only began to bloom in Jacoby, and only a few grapes ripened so that no one had ever experienced the likes of the sour wine that grew, nonetheless one pail of it in the Fall cost 27 to 36 fl. and in the next summer, because little wine again grew, the cost rose to 44 to 50 fl.

Because of the unfavorable summer, the resulting poor harvest caused the following prices in November 1816:

<i>1 Scheffel wheat [Dinkel] in Winnenden already</i>	<i>16-18 f.</i>
<i>the oats</i>	<i>8-10 f.</i>
<i>1 Simri peas</i>	<i>4-5 f.</i>
<i>Lentels, the same</i>	
<i>1 Simri field beans</i>	<i>2-2 f.</i>
<i>1 Simri vetch</i>	<i>1 f. 30x – 2f.</i>
<i>and the potatoes 1 Simri</i>	<i>1 f.</i>

these the costs were, and the inflation then increased so that in the month of July 1817

<i>1 Scheffel wheat</i>	<i>36-40 f.</i>
<i>1 “ oats</i>	<i>20-24 f.</i>
<i>1 Simri peas</i>	<i>8-11 f.</i>
<i>1 “ lentels</i>	<i>8-11 f.</i>
<i>1 ‘ vetch</i>	<i>3-4 f.</i>
<i>1 “ welsh corn</i>	<i>9-10 f</i>
<i>1 “ field beans</i>	<i>6-8 f.</i>
<i>1 “ white beans</i>	<i>7-8 f.</i>
<i>1 “ potatoes</i>	<i>4-6 f.</i>
<i>and 8 pounds of bread cost 2f.</i>	

The government wanted to put a stop to these extravagant prices, so that it controlled the price of wheat at 14-16 f, but thereby the misery only increased, because one could not find anything to buy, and the misery came to be so widespread that many people would have died of hunger had not the most powerful of the states princes arranged that grain should be bought from the outside, and distributed to needy.

From this grain, out townspeople received

<i>Wheat [Dinkel]</i>	<i>109 scheffel</i>
<i>Corn</i>	<i>15 “</i>
<i>Hops</i>	<i>19 “ 3 simri</i>
<i>wheat [Weizen]</i>	<i>19 “ 3 “</i>
<i>rye</i>	<i>15 “ 4 “</i>
<i>barley</i>	<i>18 “ 7 “</i>
<i>potatoes</i>	<i>334 Simri</i>

The inflation and hunger was felt so hard by many that in order for them and their children to survive, they boiled snails and cooked green cabbage from so called pig’s ears [a form of weed] and ate them, whereby they became enfeebled and often could no longer work, and even worse could not walk, and as a result of the hunger their feet swelled and their heads swelled, and this went on for a quarter of a year, so that many

were so afraid, that when they again had enough to eat, death would snatch them, and thus a general epidemic would result. Thank God that at the date recorded below this has not yet occurred..

Each of these (: if he had succeeded to survive the hunger:) gradually recovered and slowly regained his health. Here one must remark, that God took care that in the following years the best and most healthy produce of all kinds grew in great sufficiency, and helped humanity recover. Whereby however it is also to be remarked that the price of the produce still remained high, so that the people still needed to be thrifty, and could not overly indulge themselves, with the result that gradually they recovered their bodily strength and stayed healthy.

The population was in this time 1600.

This was written 20 December 1817 by the then Mayor David Friedrich Lederer.*