Chapter 1 – Rationale for Rationing

The War

Into this motley scene of trade in which merchants struggled with each other to please consumers rich and poor, young and old, chic and frumpish, with subtle mixtures of price, quality and style, came the war, the greatest consumer of all, like a giant tapeworm, exacting, changeable, insatiate.

-H. E. Wadsworth, *Utility Cloth and Clothing Scheme*

Economic recovery after the Great Depression was just beginning and unemployment was still high in 1939, when Germany invaded Poland and set the Second World War into motion. A massive consumer, the war needed:

Labour, factory space, internal transport, domestically produced materials and fuel—indeed, resources of all kinds—[that] must be diverted to the war effort, leaving only enough on civilian work to produce the “essential minimum” needed to maintain the population’s strength and morale.

The threat of attack on global shipping, embargoes on trade and invading enemy forces pilfering supplies from occupied countries resulted in shortages that intensified civilian deprivation and suffering. Rationing, defined as the “distribution of resources on the basis of equity or need or some criterion of priority,” was inevitable in many countries as production of supplies for the military was prioritized, creating a scarcity of goods to fulfill the needs of private citizens.

The governments of Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, Russia,

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the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States implemented programs to ration consumer goods. Countries that had been invaded by Germany and Japan were also subjected to rationing, often more intense and austere as the invaders pilfered supplies to send back home. Although rationing was “meant to be a token of mutual fairness and equality of sacrifice in wartime,” it was sometimes just a redistribution of “misery for all.”

Social class, occupation and geographic location all played a part in the degree of hardship that rationing and restrictions inflicted on individuals. Upper class families, who already had large wardrobes, were better equipped to endure scarcity because they did not have to wear the same garment every day during the indeterminable length of the war. The lower classes who generally owned very limited wardrobes, especially after the economically challenging years of the 1930s, suffered the most. Families with growing children experienced hardship as the young outgrew their clothing. Hand-me-downs, repurposing and mending became universal solutions when new clothing could not be purchased. However, after years of wearing the same patched and mended clothing daily, wardrobes became threadbare.

Rationing was a complicated issue, considered one’s patriotic duty in some countries and the harsh order of the conquering enemy in others. In the UK and the USA, the government presented rationing in the media as everyone’s patriotic duty. Wearing sweaters with mended holes and clothing with patches were badges of honor for civilians who considered their fight on

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8 Ibid., 80.
the home front as important as the soldiers on the warfront.  

**Implications of Rationing**

Rationing was based on the principle that during times of austerity, government intervention and control could ensure that each person would get their fair share of limited consumer products. By regulating production, pricing, wages, distribution and even manpower, governments controlled consumers’ ability to purchase food, fuel and clothing. Efficiency and production increased as a result of regulations but also restricted workers’ freedom. For example, a “worker could be frozen in his job, transferred, or placed in a military training plan” depending on the government’s needs.

![Figure 1.1: Herbert Roese, Rationing means a fair share for all of us, 1943, Courtesy of Alamy Images.](image)

Food and fuel were always the first to be rationed. Clothing and shoe rationing followed as the demands of the military resulted in widespread scarcity. The military needed wool and...
cotton for uniforms, silk and nylon for parachutes and leather and rubber for boots and shoes. The military’s needs always took priority over civilians. Shops still selling pre-war stocks were soon depleted, leaving little to buy, even for those with money. As apparel workers and facilities, previously employed in civilian production, moved to war work, the scarcity of textile goods intensified.

The complexity and variety of apparel made clothing rationing much more difficult than simply rationing food items like butter or sugar which provided more leeway. With food items, consumers could easily take what they could get. If meat was not available, they could eat bread or potatoes. Clothing is not interchangeable in the same way. “A man who badly wants socks will not take kindly to a shirt or an overcoat as a substitute.”

Walt Whitman Rostow, an American economist weighed in: “Clothing is heterogeneous; it varies in quality; the demand for it varies with age, occupation, locale and season; it is manufactured by numerous firms; and it is semi-durable. From these characteristics stem the major difficulties in any system of clothing rationing.”

Therefore, clothing rationing required a different system. Unlike food rationing, which offered consumers an equal share, the clothing system extended an equal opportunity to buy any commodity. Ration cards that provided a varied number of points for each category of clothing were issued in many countries. These cards worked as a form of alternative currency that limited consumers’ ability to purchase more than their fair share. Even if they had the money to

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21 Ibid.
buy, they also needed to give the merchant the appropriate number of point coupons.

Governments used the point system to control demand by regulating the amount of points required to purchase. For example, a higher point value could be offered for scarce or highly demanded products. If a particular fiber was scarcer than another, a high price could be placed on clothing made in that fiber.\textsuperscript{22} If an item was in demand, raw goods could be shifted to produce that item. For example, if the demand for socks increased, cotton or wool yarns could be shifted from a less needed item to sock production.\textsuperscript{23}

Problems existed in the rationing system because some people had more money than others and could therefore use their point allotment to buy superior quality clothing, yielding a higher profit for the manufacturer.\textsuperscript{24} The danger was that if all manufacturers shifted production to high price clothing, fewer resources would be available for the less well-off. Rostow explained: “This is, however, a general characteristic of any system that permits unequal money incomes to express themselves in the market for consumption goods and, short of income rationing on an egalitarian basis, or total rationing of consumers’ goods, it will tend to persist.”\textsuperscript{25}

Clothing rationing was not a perfect system. Shortages were common, leading to long lines at stores. A major part of a housewife’s day during the Second World War was waiting in line for a chance to use her coupons to buy scarce necessities.\textsuperscript{26} In many countries, at the end of the war when scarcity was extreme, neither money nor coupons could buy anything.

An array of negative opportunities, including hoarding, profiteering, price gouging, inflation and discrimination between the haves and the have-nots resulted due to rationing. Even

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Rostow, "Price Control and Rationing," 498.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
though the point system attempted to control or prevent these semi-legal activities, many civilians turned to alternative forms of commerce to acquire necessities no longer available. Nearly every person interviewed agreed that they had some experience with the black market, (see Chapter 7).

**Germany’s Attempts at Rationing Fall Short**

Lydia (born 1928, German/Chinese) spoke about hardship as the war broke out in Europe: “All the leather goods went to the army. All the good things went to the soldiers. To outfit them.” In spite of shortages caused by the military’s needs, Germany was initially reluctant to introduce rationing because it had resulted in unrest during the First World War. The government was reluctant to repeat their previous mistakes. Hitler thought that the war would be quickly over and would have a negligible impact on the nation’s economy. He even stated that he hated to restrict women’s need to be beautiful and therefore did not want to impede cosmetics sales.

Great Britain and France imposed a blockade in the English Channel in 1939, in response to the German invasion of Poland. The blockade closed the North Sea to all trade with Germany, thus cutting off essential shipments of war supplies. The formerly lucrative German textile industry, dependent on imported fabric, was now cut off from supplies of imported raw goods. Civilian clothing and shoe production declined severely. “In some regions, all textile production was closed down and the floor space converted to other purposes.”

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27 Lydia (born 1928, German/Chinese) in discussion with the author, October 9, 2019
Despite Hitler’s efforts to maintain an image of prosperity the delusion of a quick victory did not last; even though civilian production maintained or even increased levels in some industries until 1941. In November 1939, as textile shortages and scarcity intensified, clothing rationing cards were issued. Each person received 100 points to purchase apparel for one year. As scarcity increased during the following years, the allotment of points was reduced.

The winter of 1941-2, as well as several following winters, were reported to be the coldest in Europe during the 20th century. German soldiers, poorly equipped due to limited clothing, fuel and food, suffered from the severe cold. Westbrook Pegler, a popular USA journalist, reported in 1942 that Hitler: “[S]tripped most of the people of Europe to clothe his armies and civilians, [and] is now forced to strip his own people on the home front to remedy his blunder and with no prospect that he will be able to clothe these millions for next winter or the next.” The article stated that Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s propaganda minister, ordered civilians to turn over “all overcoats, all shoes with warm linings, all heavy underwear and furs” to be sent to the Germans fighting in Russia. On December 27, 1941, Hitler ordered the Sturmabteilung or Storm Detachment, known as the Brown Shirts, to enforce the collection of civilian clothing. The Brown Shirts started a house-to-house collection of all warm clothing. Even “woolen bathing trunks for conversion into helmets for the troops” were demanded. Try as they might, it

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33 Ibid., 28.
34 Charman, The German Home Front 1939-1945, 49.
35 Woolston, The Structure of the Nazi Economy, 106.
41 William L. Shirer, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 42. The Sturmabteilung, also called the S.A., dressed in brown uniforms.
was impossible for civilians to hide any remaining clothing because the rationing system kept records of who had purchased a winter coat, shoes, or long underwear. The Brown Shirts could come to reclaim them. Pegler surmised that “this is bound to suggest that Germany is beginning to run out of time, because a whole continent cannot go on indefinitely without winter clothing and there is no apparent source of a new supply.”

The League of Nations report on rationing, published in 1942, called Hitler’s efforts “negative rationing inasmuch as the population was obliged to give up heavy woolens, ski boots, blankets and furs already in their possession.” The report estimated that: “32,000,000 pieces of woolen clothing and 533,000 fur coats were collected.”

The consequence of any German citizen’s attempt to resist were clearly stated: “Anyone who conceals or neglects to give up the requisitioned clothing and blankets will be subject to the usual penalties for sabotage and neighbor will spy on neighbor to enlarge the yield.”

Finally, the 3rd Reich, desperate to relieve suffering, turned to raiding the countries it had conquered. Occupied nations, including Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland and Yugoslavia, suffered intense rationing which was calculated to siphon off raw materials, products and manpower to support Germany. Citizens of invaded countries were forced to turn over all their warm clothing and blankets. Thereafter, only limited and heavily restricted supplies remained in stores. Unfortunately for Hitler, the occupants of the invaded countries were already severely impoverished and his tactic of raiding clothing only worked for so long.

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43 Ibid.
It is difficult for current generations living in industrialized nations in the northern hemisphere, used to living with central heating, vehicles with heated seats and super insulated high-tech clothing, to understand the importance of warm clothing during the war. Grace Hodgson, an American woman recalling winters in the American Midwest during the 1930s Great Depression, wrote a poem called Cold, that captures the essence of experiencing extreme winters.

[begin side box]

Cold

You don’t know cold:
Until you sink to your hips in fresh snow with each step, carrying a rifle.
Until you have followed your brother who has been following a pheasant for hours.
Until you watch the sinking sun and feel your sinking heart.
Until you trudge home in the fading light, empty handed and hungry.
Then you know cold.

You don’t know cold,
Until all the beds are moved into the dining room near the wood burning stove.
Until your siblings are playing on the beds because the floor is too cold.
Until your mother goes to the kitchen in a wool coat, a knit cap and overshoes to make a milk soup for her family.
Then you know cold.

Grace Hodgson⁴⁷

[end side box]

German clothing stores selling the last limited remains of pre-war stock, struggled to survive the war. Allied bombings dealt a final blow, destroying any remaining retail outlets and ending any prospect of buying civilian goods.⁴⁸ Remscheid, a town in North Rhine-Westphalia, hit especially hard in a British bombing raid on July 31, 1943, lost ninety percent of their retail

⁴⁸ Guenther, Nazi Chic? Fashioning Women in the Third Reich, 260.
stores. Civilians bombed out of their homes, even with clothing ration coupons and money in their hand, had no means of to replenishing their meager wardrobes.

Hitler’s war did not prove to be quick or easy, as originally predicted. The attempts to ration clothing to provide fair shares became a farce. There was no merchandise to buy, with or without ration tickets. By the end of the war, when all resources had been depleted, clothing was so scarce that ration cards were suspended. Thereafter, new clothes could only be purchased by applying for a special permit and proving dire need.

Germany’s attempt to maintain civilian morale and a sense of prosperity by delaying the onset of rationing, resulted in both military and civilians suffering from the lack of food, clothing and other basic commodities. Irene Guenther in her book: Nazi Chic, concluded: “[O]nce shortages reached crisis proportions and “plenty” was only accessible to the well-connected few,” the illusion of plenty proved to be imaginary. Hitler’s efforts to maintain a sense of prosperity in hopes of maintaining his popularity ultimately resulted in his demise. Germany waited too long to implement rationing and the program was considered a failure.

United Kingdom

In the 1930s, Great Britain anticipated that war with Germany was again on the horizon. During the First World War, 1914-1918, when rationing was not enacted, civilians had suffered from shortages and scarcity. Therefore, even though various attempts were made to avoid rationing, based on the previous negative experience, it was determined that government control

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50 Guenther, Nazi Chic? Fashioning Women in the Third Reich, 218.
52 Guenther, Nazi Chic? Fashioning Women in the Third Reich, 272.
53 Charman, The German Home Front 1939-1945, 144.
55 Guenther, Nazi Chic? Fashioning Women in the Third Reich, 19.
of consumer products, including clothing and shoes, was inevitable.\textsuperscript{56} The UK declared war against Germany on September 3, 1939. Rationing of petrol and food consumption was initiated on January 8, 1940.\textsuperscript{57}

The UK had initially tried to deal with shortages by asking civilians to voluntarily curtail buying new clothes. When the attempt failed, the government appealed to civilians’ sense of patriotism by encouraging the public to view clothing rationing as their contribution to the war effort. Sacrifice and austerity became the central message of propaganda featured in posters, advertising and newsreels. Any time a civilian could do without, they were freeing-up production space and resources to provide for soldiers fighting the war.

Women’s magazines helped deliver the message of patriotism and sacrifice in both their editorial content and advertising. An especially touching ad for Bairns-wear Knitting Wools, featured a young boy. He declares: ‘[S]o it’s up to us chaps… I heard Mummy saying how difficult it is to get Bairns-wear for knitting our woollies, so we’ll have to be very careful – they’ve got to last a long time.’\textsuperscript{58}

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\ \textsuperscript{56} Hancock and Gowing, \textit{British War Economy}, 330.
\textsuperscript{57} Haskew and Brinkley, \textit{The World War II Desk Reference: With the Eisenhower Center for American Studies}, 386.
\textsuperscript{58} Women and Home, "So It Is up to Us Chaps," October, 1942, 6.
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Christopher Sladen, “a retired civil servant who experienced the clothing policies first hand,”\textsuperscript{59} reported in his book: \textit{The Conscription of Fashion}, that the majority of civilians accepted the reality of wartime austerity and “were prepared to face sacrifices of all kinds provided they thought the Government was making real efforts and the burden of restriction and shortages was seen to be fairly borne.”\textsuperscript{60}

The Board of Trade (BoT), the government department concerned with commerce and industry, was selected to regulate civilian apparel distribution.\textsuperscript{61} The board devised two criteria to determine if a product needed to be rationed. There had to be either a shortage or a need to “release man-power, raw materials and equipment for use in other industries.”\textsuperscript{62} Clothing and

\textsuperscript{60} Sladen, \textit{The Conscription of Fashion: Utility Cloth, Clothing, and Footwear, 1941-1952}, 18.
\textsuperscript{61} Hancock and Gowing, \textit{British War Economy}, 51.
textiles fulfilled both criteria since fabric, thread, needles and sewing machines were in short supply and textile workers and factories needed to be shifted to war work. Clothing and shoe rationing, determined by the board to be: “A consideration no less important than precautions against inflation and insistence upon efficiency in the processes of production and distribution” was inaugurated in June 1941.  

A point-based rationing system was instituted in which each article was given a value, regardless of the price. In this system, “the most costly gown from an exclusive West End salon calls for the same number of coupons as the cheapest frock from the most humble East End shop.” Although their system was based on Germany’s failed rationing technique, the UK pledged that all coupons would be honored. There would be no empty shelves as in Germany. This promise was kept and “there had never been serious ‘coupon clumping,’” or consumers stuck with unusable coupons due to shortages.  

On January 14, 1940, the New York Times reported: “With the army’s size growing rapidly at each new conscription call there is such a heavy demand for uniforms and other garments that cloth manufacturers must meet government orders before attending to civilian demands.” All fields of manufacturing, including civilian clothing, textile and shoe factories, were mandated to produce for the military. Some shops worked on both military and civilian goods, but their time was precious and war work always took precedence. Civilian industries,  

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63 Hancock and Gowing, *British War Economy*, 50.  
deemed non-essential, were either shifted to military work or shut down, releasing their workers to take on war time jobs.

In spite of government efforts to provide fair shares for all, initial attempts to conserve resources proved to have little success.\(^6^8\) Even though the *Price of Goods Act*, initiated November 16, 1939, prohibited raising prices above their August 21, 1936 level, manufactures “quickly switched production to lines plainly not subject to price control.”\(^6^9\) The *Price of Goods Act* carried no authority to control clothing consumption and as resources became limited, stores sold them at any price the market could bear. Prices of non-food consumer goods rose 75% above their pre-war level by May 1941 and affordable clothing was scarce.”\(^7^0\) With or without a ration ticket or no ration ticket, clothing was hard to come by. Ultimately, a new solution was needed.\(^7^1\)

**Utility System**

![Figure 1.3: A model poses on a Bloomsbury rooftop to show off her two-tone Atrima dress, costing 7 coupons, 1943. D14837, Courtesy Imperial War Museum.](image)

Finally, the British government determined that the best way to deal with clothing

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\(^{69}\) Ibid.


\(^{71}\) Hancock and Gowing, *British War Economy*, 336.
scarcity was to take over manufacturing and produce specially designed garments meeting the requirements of rationing. To achieve this goal, the BoT devised the *Utility Clothing Scheme* in May 1941, created in hopes of making the distribution of limited clothing resources more democratic. 72 To achieve this goal, the range of products was reduced to focus on a smaller and more practical assortment.

The Utility silhouette was slim and devoid of details and unnecessary trimmings. The BoT standardized the size, weight and weave of fabric, restricting yardage allowance to only 2 ¾ yards for a coat and 2 yards for a dress.73 Each garment then had to be clearly labeled with the Utility mark.74

![Figure 1.4: Label for Utility System clothing.](#)

Clothing austerity regulations were enacted to conserve precious fabric by simplifying the design and reducing cost.75 Many style features on men’s and women’s garments were prohibited. Details including “the number of pleats, seams, buttons and buttonholes was limited and maximum widths fixed for sleeves, belts, hems and collars. Decorative additions such as embroidery, fur or leather on outerwear and ornamental stitching on underwear, were

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prohibited.” The *New York Times* reported on March 4, 1942: “For women there will be shorter skirts, fewer styles and less choice of colors. Men will find their trousers without cuffs and their sleeves minus buttons, while double-breasted coats are destined to go.” Doreen (born 1929, UK) reported: “Hems of skirts etc. were no longer than 19 inches or just above the knee.”

A brilliant marketing tactic was employed to improve the reception of Utility; the BoT commissioned ten British fashion designers to create exclusive designs. This group, called the *Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers*, included Hardy Amies, Norman Hartnell, Peter Russell, The House of Worth, Bianca Mosca at Jacqmar, Angele Delanghe, Digby Morton, Victor Stiebel, Edward Molyneux, Charles Creed at Fortnum & Mason and Michael Sherard. These were some of the most well-known designers of the day in the UK. Styles were developed for both the domestic and the export markets, although revenue from exported garments supported the war effort and did not have to conform to restrictions.

The Utility system, in both political and economic terms, was a success. The system

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78 Doreen, (born 1929, UK), answer to questionnaire passed out at War Brides luncheon, March 12, 2012  
was also applied to “furniture, pottery, hollow ware, umbrellas, pencils, cutlery, suitcases and many other civilian articles.”

In 1944, Audrey Withers, editor of *British Vogue*, praised the rationing effort and coupon system. She claimed that both the Utility System and rationing improved style by simplifying it. She stated that austerity had served a valuable purpose:

> They save us from the plague of fussy detail which was so often used to take the eye from poor material, poor cut, poor workmanship. In this sense, austerity has done, by law, what *Vogue* has always advocated. The idea of making women conscious of dress fundamentals by eliminating clothes of inessentials.

*British Vogue* had attempted to train women before the war to: “Plan your wardrobe. Don’t go in for thoughtless, spur-of-the moment shopping. Make each new purchase dovetail with the rest. The smaller your wardrobe, the more must each item be versatile, interchangeable and so on.”

Withers called clothing coupons “the other great educator in dress sense.”

Civilians looked forward to relief from scarcity after the war. However, their suffering continued as rationing was extended for many years. Respite finally came on February 1, 1949, when Harold Wilson, President of the BoT, announced that “the biggest relaxation [of rationing] since clothing rationing began in Britain nearly eight years ago will enable a man or woman to buy a new suit or dress from tomorrow on without coupons.” Wilson reported that better production methods for wool had improved efficiency. However, cotton, still in short supply, resulted in men’s shirts remaining on the ration system.

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83 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
France

Attempting to relieve the strain on scarce raw materials, supplies and new clothing, France initiated rationing six months after declaring war with Germany, September 3, 1939. British foreign correspondent and soldier, Charles Hargrove, who lived in France and whose native tongue was French, described the inception of restrictions on March 1, 1940: “Six months after the beginning of the war, France definitely is entering a new economic phase—a regime of drastic restrictions on consumptions.”

The situation in France worsened quickly after Germany invaded on May 10, 1940. The French army was no match to the Germans and they were quickly defeated. On June 22, 1940 France signed the Armistice which conceded northern and western France to German occupation.

A condition of the Armistice was that the majority of French production had to be shipped to Germany to support both civilians and the war effort. Suffering from shortages of fuel, food and clothing, Germany took advantage of the occupation of France to provide a source of desperately needed supplies. Additionally, Germany imposed strict rationing which allowed barely enough to support life. “The burden was so heavy that French people were literally turned into slaves of the Third Reich, required to work for it, either directly or indirectly, for little or no recompense and forced to consume less and less each year due to its claims on French

88 Ibid.
resources.” To further intensify clothing scarcity, Maréchal Pétain, the head of France’s Vichy government, signed an order on September 1, 1940 that “limited the quantities of textiles manufactured to 30 per cent of sales in 1938.”

Rationing in France and rationing in the UK, “though the same in principle, differed profoundly in application. One was imposed by the enemy; the other had the consent of the people.” In France where the fight had already been lost, the foreign invaders imposed rationing as an insult to civilians already living with barely enough to survive.

Lucie Aubrac, a member of the French Resistance, expressed the conflict and grief of the citizens of France, so proud of their country and anguished by defeat.

Dans notre France si riche, il n’y a presque plus rien à manger. On nous donne des cartes de rationnement pour la nourriture, le charbon, les vêtements, les chaussures. On a souvent faim! (translation author’s own)

In our France so rich, there is almost nothing to eat. They give us ration cards for food, charcoal, clothing, shoes. We are often hungry.

Germany claimed that rationing was necessary because of material and manpower shortages. However, the manpower shortage in France was not due to military enlistment but to the one million French soldiers sent off to Germany as prisoners of war or to work in factories. The deportation of Jewish apparel workers to German concentration camps devastated the garment industry. In spite of the deportation, the apparel industry still employed thousands in France and struggled to survive to provide the workers with livelihood.

92 Christofferson and Christofferson, France During World War II: From Defeat to Liberation, 35.
93 Veillon, Fashion under the Occupation, 40.
96 Christofferson and Christofferson, France During World War II: From Defeat to Liberation, 35.
Germany envisioned moving the French couture to Berlin and Vienna, including the designers, the workers and the Ecole Supérieure that trained future employees, thereby ending France’s tyranny over fashion, which they argued was out of touch with what a woman of taste wanted to wear.\footnote{Veillon, \textit{Fashion under the Occupation}, 85.} Designer Lucien Lelong, spearheaded the movement to convince Hitler, who envisioned moving the industry to Berlin, that French fashion could only be created in its familiar surroundings in Paris.\footnote{Ibid., 85-6.} Lelong met with the authorities in Berlin and succeeded in convincing the German textile industry leaders to leave French fashion in Paris. Lelong continued to fight for the preservation of the Haute Couture, arguing that a maximum number of side business supplying specialty embroidery, accessories, jewelers and footwear, benefited from the construction.

Keeping the industry alive and the workers on payroll proved to be a struggle, especially with the loss of the former international clientele. Although the haute couture benefited from special “couture ration cards,” allowing wealthy French women to buy from the Haute Couture houses, the end of nightlife due to the curfew eliminated most occasions to wear couture gowns.\footnote{Ibid., 116.} In spite of shortages of material and strict regulations imposed on the quantity and specifications of designs, even the denial of fashion shows, the industry struggled to continue working in the hopes of salvaging France’s position as the world’s fashion leader after the war.\footnote{Ibid., 93.}

The clothing rationing system in France, was called System D, the “D” stood for “débrouille,” from the French verb “débrouillard,” which means being resourceful, to manage, or get by.\footnote{Jean-Paul Le Maguet, "Ravitaillement Et Système D Sous L'occupation," in \textit{Le Mémorial de Caen} (Caen: Editions Mémorial De Caen, 2000-2005), 11.} First limited to shoes because of the shortage of leather, thread and tanning material, the restrictions, the restrictions spawned the creation of shoes made of unrationed materials, including wooden soled clogs, plaited straw, cast magnesium, glass, lucite, cork and old...
tires. Jeanne, a war bride living in Canada, remembered: “We wore shoes with ‘platform soles’ made of wood. We called them ‘Hollywood soles,’ the top nailed to those soles were often canvas, fabric, seldom leather unless false leather.”

Elizabeth Hoyt, an American woman who lived outside of Paris during the war, described the footwear situation in France in a letter to her sister, published in the American edition of Vogue:

The only shoes readily obtainable have wooden soles, with little horseshoes of fiber nailed to the soles to deaden the clatter. The more expensive designs have hinges in the soles, which makes walking somewhat more comfortable, although with so much walking to be done and with the chilblains that everyone develops as soon as winter approaches, all walking is an ordeal.

Adelaide, in the Netherlands had similar shoes. “I remember I had wooden soles they were made in sections so they moved. I even had dancing shoes made like that.”

Rumors of impending clothing rationing circulated following shoe rationing. Many women panicked and rushed to their custom tailors, intent on placing orders before restrictions

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104 Jeanne (born 1927, Tours, France) in discussion with the author during the War Brides Association Reunion of the Queen Mary, Long Beach, CA, September
were issued. Department stores as well experienced increased sales as the rumors spread. Finally, on February 11, 1941, clothing rationing was announced.\textsuperscript{108} The following week, all clothing sales stopped to await the distribution of ration tickets.\textsuperscript{109} One week later, clothing could again be purchased but only by presenting ration tickets along with money.

Elizabeth Hoyt wrote to her sister again once again, describing her reaction to clothing rationing:

To a woman, clothing restrictions are quite as important as food restrictions and clothing rations are so meager that it is impossible to dress comfortably-or even adequately-without recourse to “Black Markets’ at enormous prices.” . . . “Fortunately, I have a pre-war wardrobe and have been gradually wearing this to shreds, resorting to all sorts of schemes to provide something new.\textsuperscript{110}

Despite wartime shortages, Hans-George von Studnitz, a German journalist who visited Paris in October 1943, noted that the French had not lost their style. He wrote in his autobiography:

Parisian good taste is still triumphant, even in the fifth year of the war. Whether it be some luxury article or something of quite ordinary, everyday use, there is nothing here which is not beautiful to look at – a great contrast to our shops at home, in which one rarely sees anything that is not hideous. Many of the articles on show are made of substitute material. Shoes with wooden soles and ladies’ handbags made of cloth are so beautifully finished, that no one bothers to buy the genuine article, which is still obtainable in the black market.\textsuperscript{111}

By the end of the Second World War, French garment manufacturers were operating at only 25\% of their prewar capacity. Due to the extreme impact the German occupation had on the French economy; clothing rationing continued until 1949-50.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{108} Veillon, \textit{Fashion under the Occupation}, 55.
\textsuperscript{110} Hoyt, \textit{People and Ideas: How We Live in France}," 65.
American *Vogue* reported on the first fashions from Paris in their October 15, 1944 issues, after four years of silence. The sketches shown were noted to be pre-war designs. *Vogue* explained that during the occupation the designers purposely created “to be deliberately fancy and exaggerated, in order to taunt the Germans.”\(^{113}\)

**United States**

One day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the USA declared war against Japan. Two days later, December 10, 1941, by declaring war against Germany, the USA officially entered the Second World War. Although rich with natural resources, the voracious requirement for war supplies and the responsibility of the lend-lease program with the UK, resulted in civilian shortages and the need for rationing.\(^{114}\) Lend-lease was a program where the USA leant war ships and other war material to the UK with the understanding that the equipment would be returned after the war. The program allowed the USA to maintain its neutrality while at the same time taking action to help prevent Hitler winning the war.\(^{115}\)

Eventually rubber, gasoline, silk, nylon, shoes and food were rationed.\(^{116}\) Economic scholar Albert Lauterbach defined the necessity for rationing during a time of prosperity and shortage as experienced in the USA: “Rationing is generally recognized as an indispensable complement to price control if the latter is to be effective in a period of rising money incomes and decreasing supply of consumers’ goods.”\(^{117}\) In developing government controls on consumption, efforts were made to distribute limited resources fairly by equally weighing the needs of consumers against the needs for the war effort.\(^{118}\)

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\(^{114}\) Lauterbach, "From Rationing to Informed Consumption," 209.


\(^{117}\) Lauterbach, "From Rationing to Informed Consumption," 209.

Rubber shortages created problems for both the military and civilians. Military needs, as always, were prioritized, leaving civilians who needed to buy tires, rubber boots or work shoes out of luck after September 29, 1942 when restrictions were enacted. Rubber rationing was only the first step in the “government mandated rationing” program. The New York Times compared the USA austerity program with the UK: “Rationing in this country is only a mild reflection of the program which has been in force in England since soon after the outbreak of the war. Only ten products have been ordered subject to rationing, as compared with a hundred or more in England.”

Figure 1.7: America Needs your Scrap Rubber, 1942, WWII Propaganda Poster by The War Production Board. Courtesy Boston Public Library, Print Department.

Shoe rationing inevitably followed rubber rationing. As shoe industry workers joined up and leather resources became scarcer, government controls limited civilians to three new pairs

120 Ibid.
a year.\textsuperscript{122} The \textit{New York Times} reported: “Before the war we could get leather from South America if our own supply was inadequate; today we have more important uses for our merchant ships.”\textsuperscript{123} Not only was shipping hazardous due to the potential of attack, limited cargo space was prioritized for the military, limiting the importation of all products for civilians.\textsuperscript{124}

People who needed more shoes than the ration allowed had to apply to the rationing board for special permission. The board’s decision depended on the requesters’ need. Work shoes not supplied by the employer might be permitted, but only if the shoes were not used for recreation or to maintain personal appearance.\textsuperscript{125} Applications for rubber boots or shoes required justification, especially if need was related to inessential work. Work essential to the war effort or protection of the nation’s health and safety or to the maintenance of mines would more likely gain permission.\textsuperscript{126} Requests based on the need to follow fashion or to maintain appearance were never granted.

Shoe ration tickets were transferable among family members, due to the difference between men’s and women’s buying habits.\textsuperscript{127} People often traded stamps with a relative who had less need or desire for a new pair of shoes. Coupons for shoes had no termination date so could be saved and used when needed.\textsuperscript{128}

Beth L., a teenager growing up in Davis, California during the Second World War, said: “I was hard on my shoes. I borrowed my father’s ration stamps or wore non-rationed shoes.”\textsuperscript{129} Shoes made of cloth or rope, with cork or wooden soles became the fashion in the USA, as they

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{122} Ibid.
\bibitem{124} Lauterbach, "From Rationing to Informed Consumption," 209.
\bibitem{125} Kolkman, "US Rationing During WWII Part 8: Shoes," 2.
\bibitem{126} Ibid., 3.
\bibitem{127} The Washington Post, "Rationing Made Easy: Why Shoe Rationing?,” B3.
\bibitem{128} Kolkman, "US Rationing During WWII Part 8: Shoes," 1.
\bibitem{129} Beth L. (born 1935, Missouri, USA) in conversation with the author , April 2014.
\end{thebibliography}
had in France when leather and rubber were restricted.

![Image of Genuine Steerhide Huaraches]

**Figure 1.8:** Genuine Steerhide Huaraches, No Ration Coupon Required, *Life* Magazine, April 19, 1943: 94.

Rumors of clothing rationing followed the announcement of shoe rationing. Consumers, motivated by fear, rushed to stores to buy new clothes before it was too late, and stocked up. Unfortunately, their unnecessary hoarding only increased scarcity in the long run.

Eventually, the demands of outfitting the military stressed not only the available supply of raw materials but production capabilities as well. An order placed by the military for soldier’s cotton underwear alone was predicted to deplete all available cotton cloth in the USA. Finally in view of these pending shortages, the the War Production Board’s (WPB) initiated General Limitation Order L-85 to ration “Feminine Apparel for Outer Wear and Certain Other Garments”

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131 Ibid.
on Friday, April 10, 1942. The order stated that:

The fulfillment of requirements for the defense of the USA has created a shortage in the supply of wool, silk, rayon, cotton and linen for defense, for private account and for export; and the following order is deemed necessary and appropriate in the public interest and to promote the national defense.

![Insignia for the USA War Production Board, WWII.](image)

Specific rules of General Limitation Order L-85 regulated the lengths and measurements of garments to conserve resources. These regulations were primarily focused on manufacturers. Specifications were directed to “any person making feminine apparel for resale or on commission, including, but without limitation, the following: manufacturers to the trade, tailors, custom dressmakers, retailers and home dressmakers.” Garments and fabric measurements and weights were specified. Exceptions were made for garments put into work before the date of the enactment. The regulations did not apply to infants and toddlers clothing, bridal gowns, maternity dress, clothing for “persons who, because of abnormal height, size of physical deformities, require additional material,” burial gowns, religious garments sold to religious sects or to the military.

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134 Ibid.
135 Ibid.
136 Ibid., 2723.
Style details regulated or eliminated to reduce fabric consumption included:

- French cuffs
- Double layer material on yokes
- Balloon, dolman, or leg-of-mutton sleeves
- Fabrics which have been reduced from normal width or length by all over tucking, shirring, or pleating, except for minor trimmings.
- Inside pockets of wool cloth.
- Patch pockets of wool cloth on a lined wool cloth garment.
- Men’s vests
- Trouser pleats, cuffs
- Suits with two pairs of pants
- The number of metal pins used in packaged men’s shirts
- Interlinings containing any virgin or reprocessed wool.\textsuperscript{137}

*Life* magazine explained the new restrictions on apparel,

Uncle Sam ( . . . ) last week assumed the role of fashion designer. In a sweeping order affecting all women’s and girls’ outer wearing apparel, the WPB ( . . . ) decreed to what lengths and widths dresses, skirts, coats, suits, sleeves, belts, hems might go. Not as much as the flap of a pocket was overlooked in the order, aimed at 1) getting more garments out of materials available, and 2) preventing obsolescence of styles now current.\textsuperscript{138}

The *Washington Post* assured civilians on November 16, 1942 that the WPB’s efforts to simplify and standardize “threads, linings and other materials along the lines of the British utility cloth plan,” ensured minimal requirements would be available.\textsuperscript{139}

Donald M. Nelson, the War Production Chief, testified before the House Appropriations Committee on May 15, 1943, “We have even cut the [lining] fabrics out of women’s hats in order to save fabric.”\textsuperscript{140}

Audrey Withers, editor of *British Vogue*, compared rationing in the USA to rationing in the UK in the American edition of *Vogue* titled “Fashion in England:”

\textsuperscript{138} “Women Lose Pockets and Frills to Save Fabrics,” *Life* 1942, April 20, 70.
Another factor ranged against fashion is “austerity”—our name for the restrictions on design. Your L-85 regulations seem entirely framed to save material; ours are even more concerned to save labour—which is probably a still scarcer commodity in this country. Your rules, which lay down the sweep of skirt, the length of jacket and leave it at that, are far less cramping than ours, which lay down the precise number of seams, tucks, pleats, buttons, or pockets, which may be used; and put an absolute veto on the use of lace, embroidery and so on.\footnote{Withers, "Fashion: Fashion in England," 195.}

Clothing manufacturers endured most of the responsibility for textile rationing, so it had little direct effect on consumers. Many American women interviewed had few memories of clothing shortage or rationing except for some comments about shoes. Austerity and shortages, a part of life in the 1930s, had predisposed most people to accept the reality of getting by as much as possible without spending money. Manufacturers were proud of their contributions to the war and apologized to their consumers when civilian orders could not always be filled.

For example, Talon, the zipper manufacturer, faced shortages of metal fasteners for consumers apparel. In a corset ad in \textit{Good Housekeeping} magazine, the zipper manufacturer proudly explained the responsibilities their factories had undertaken for the US military in hopes that their customers would accept shortages and take the necessary steps to make her girdle last for the duration.

\textbf{Our Job in War Time}

We are proud to have been given these responsibilities:

- To supply Talon fasteners for a wide variety of Army and Navy uses.
- To make precision ordnance parts and also precision gauges essential to the manufacture of munitions.
- To release metals needed by our Government and to use our research and engineering facilities for perfecting new material (metals and non-metals) that are less important for war production.

In order to execute this all-important program, the production of Talon fasteners for commercial use cannot be maintained at the usual level.\footnote{Talon Corporation, "Today, You've Got to Look Ahead When You Buy a Corset!," in \textit{Good Housekeeping} (New York, April 1942).}
Figure 1.10: Today, You’ve Got to Look Ahead When You Buy a Corset!, April 1942. Advertisement. Good Housekeeping: 131. Courtesy Talon Corporation.
Conclusion

War demands and consumes an enormous number of products, resulting in scarcity of civilian necessities. Production and labor forces needed to prioritize supplying the military. Goodin and Dryzek, in *Justice Deferred: Wartime Rationing and Postwar Welfare Policy*, referred to government imposed rationing as “a corollary of modern total war.”143 Restrictions allowed governments to “redirect national economic resources toward the war effort.”144 Therefore, for many of the countries involved in the Second World War, restrictions and rationing of civilian consumption was an inevitability. The success of these programs varied, dependent on each countries’ prewar economic strength, available natural resources and geographic location.

Before the Second World War, many countries without enough natural resources to fulfill domestic clothing needs, relied on global shipping to obtain raw materials. With the advent of war, shipping became too dangerous because of the risk of enemy attack. Japan and to a lesser extent Germany, attacked some of their own raw material suppliers, consequently reducing the availability of civilian goods. Countries retaliated by placing embargos which further disrupted international trade. Consequently, civilian shortages were a universal issue.

Civilians in defeated countries suffered under rationing programs created to benefit residents of the occupying country. Defeated countries were forced to send a large percentage of their production to provide for enemy troops and civilians, leaving extreme scarcity at home.

The poorest countries did not even have the benefit of rationing. Antonina B. Edillo, a young girl in the Philippines, reported that she wore the same dress throughout the war. When asked about any rationing system, she replied: “That I don’t know. I don’t think so. As long as

144 Ibid.
you have money you could buy. But then even when you have money, there is nothing to buy”\textsuperscript{145}

References


Copeland, Morris A. \textit{The Impact of the War on Civilian Consumption in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada}. Washington DC, Government Publishing Office, 1945.


\textsuperscript{145} Antonina B. Edillo (born 1928, Manila, Philippines), in discussion with the author. November 4, 2015.


"Women Lose Pockets and Frills to Save Fabrics." Life 1942, 70-71.
