**The National Kitchen in Britain, 1917-1919**

**Introduction**

In early twenty-first century Britain communal efforts to alleviate food poverty are well documented, with community kitchens and social supermarkets operating alongside hundreds of food banks. These initiatives have their historical precedents. Significantly, communal feeding programmes were a fixture of Britain’s experience of total war in the twentieth century. Between 1940 and 1947 there existed a vast network of state-subsidised ‘national restaurants’. Christened by Prime Minister Winston Churchill (who feared that the Ministry of Food’s original moniker - ‘communal feeding centres’ - was too ‘redolent of Communism and the workhouse’) there were over 2,000 national restaurants operating across the country at their peak (Atkins, 2011: 139-154). Yet the national restaurants of the Second World War did not owe their success exclusively to Churchill’s marketing skills. They were partly inspired by their largely overlooked First World War predecessor: ‘national kitchens’.

National kitchens were locally administered yet part of a major nationwide government-sponsored programme to alleviate food poverty and its effects. They grew out of grass-roots projects within working class communities to combat wartime supply disruption and price inflation and were first sponsored by the state in May 1917. At the signing of the armistice in September 1918 there were 363 national kitchens in Britain but within a year the movement had all but disappeared. This article provides the first history of the national kitchens of the First World War, which existed between 1917 and 1919. It explores how this popular arm of British wartime food supply policy intersected with national cultural attitudes around food.

Operating as part of a statist food policy encompassing rationing, price control, and state purchasing, historians have pointed to the popularity of British wartime food policy in general while overlooking national kitchens as part of this scheme (see, for example, Winter, 1985; Hunt, 2010). The focus on harmony between organised labour, consumers and government in the acceptance of a comprehensive rationing system has overshadowed the national kitchen. Thus communal, municipal, or national kitchens, which preceded the roll-out of comprehensive rationing by the summer of 1918, remain an under-documented phenomenon.

Unlike the national restaurants of the Second World War, the national kitchens of the First World War have not been treated kindly by historians. To Margaret Barnett, national kitchens may have been the fruit of a new idealism which took hold in the latter stages of the war, but they failed to move beyond the old soup kitchen model; these remained ‘stolidly lower class institutions located in a dingy back street or public baths and presided over by the familiar Lady Bountiful’. In other words, they were culturally unappealing to many. According to Barnett, despite (and maybe because of) support from prominent women such as Sylvia Pankhurst and Queen Mary, egalitarianism in public dining held no appeal for the British public because the unexotic air of ‘social levelling, communism and fair shares’ hung over the venture (Barnett, 1985). Barnett’s appraisal echoes Winston Churchill’s, but it clashes with the verdict of Derek Oddy, who cites the Food Controller of North West England describing the British working man’s dining tastes: ‘the fried fish shop he knew, the cold supper bar where he could by his tripe of ‘trotters’ he was acquainted with, but a restaurant was not in his line’ (Oddy, 2003). The claim here is quite the opposite - that national kitchens were culturally unappealing to the working man who ate meals prepared by his wife at home and seldom, if ever, dined out.

This article argues instead that instances of cultural resistance to national kitchens should not be over-amplified to suggest wider unpopularity. Like other aspects of wartime food policy, the fate of national kitchens had more to do with political will than public indifference. As late as mid-1918 the Ministry of Food was talking confidently of national kitchens becoming a ‘permanent national institution’ (Ministry of Agriculture, Departmental Committee meeting on village canteens, 11 April 1918, NA, MAF, 60/329). This article argues that national kitchens had in fact proved popular, especially among lower middle class workers, and many were attractive venues at which to eat. Their demise, it is argued here, was due to political factors: primarily, the government’s decision to introduce full rationing; but also the vocal opposition to the movement from the catering trade; and, following the armistice, the dismantling of the collectivist ethic.

**Origins: ‘Communal Kitchens’**

Run by voluntary organisations such as the Salvation Army, communal soup kitchens predated the outbreak of war in August 1914. During wartime, these charitable kitchens assumed heightened importance in offering cheap but nutritious food to people caught out by price inflation (Barnett, 1985: 151). The cost of living and instances of food shortage had increased in Britain since July 1914 (see Gazeley and Newell, 2013) but for the first two years of war such trends tended to be localised (Gregory, 2008: 192-198). As well as being locally run, communal feeding schemes were also gendered, most either run by or aimed towards working class women.

With the intensification of war came the transition from Herbert Henry Asquith’s ‘Wait and See’ administration to David Lloyd George’s ‘Push and Go’ ministry in December 1916. Faced with the heightened U-boat campaign of spring 1917, a commission of enquiry linked labour unrest to food price inflation and recommended the opening of industrial canteens (Chance, 1917: 32-33). The championing of canteens implied that charitable feeding ventures were inadequate in meeting public demand. So in May 1917 the Prime Minister appointed fellow Welshman and millionaire businessman D.A. Thomas (Lord Rhondda) Food Controller. Distinguishing himself from his predecessor Hudson Kearley (Viscount Devonport), who was widely perceived to have lacked dynamism, on taking up his post Rhondda signalled a switch to swift state action. Devonport had issued a public appeal for voluntary rationing and introduced the unpopular ‘meatless days’ initiative in early 1917 (Simmonds, 2013: 205). These measures were accompanied by tens of thousands of voluntary campaigns to instil a culture of frugality, including ideas such as children’s essay competitions and cinema screenings devoted to food economy. Yet these initiatives proved limited as queues for staples like potatoes and bread soon developed (Marwick, 1991). Rhondda, by contrast, responded to rising prices by announcing the rationing of sugar, and later meat, and issuing a succession of maximum price orders.

The differences in approach between Devonport and Rhondda tend to obscure the fact that the latter initially favoured voluntary action when it came to effecting cultural shifts in British dining habits. It was Devonport who introduced the first restrictions on restaurants via the Public Meals Order of 5 December 1916, limiting day meals to two courses and evening meals to three courses (Marwick, 1991: 240). Rhondda followed this with rationing by weight in restaurants in April 1917 and restrictions on the serving of afternoon tea, but initially favoured local initiative over statist action when it came to communal feeding. Rhondda’s early preference for voluntarism over statism was reflected in the Ministry of Food’s early endorsement of communal feeding schemes. In May 1917, the Ministry of Food publicly encouraged the opening of more *voluntary* communal kitchens (J.S. Middleton to Lord Rhondda, 15 June 1917, PHM, WNC, 14/4/1/2:1). At the same time, one of Rhondda’s understudies at the Ministry, Kennedy Jones (a former journalist and Unionist politician who had contested the 1916 Wimbledon election on the radical right wing ticket of the ‘Do-it-now party’) was tasked with putting together a guidebook to accompany the new experiment in British communal dining.

**The Brave New World of Communal Dining and British cultures of consumption**

‘Probably at some future time it will be difficult to believe that each household in the country did its own separate marketing, buying small amounts of food from retail dealers a hundred per cent above cost price, that every hundred houses in a street had each its own fire for cooking, and that at least a hundred human beings were engaged in serving meals that could have been prepared by half a dozen trained assistants’

This was the verdict of Kennedy Jones’s hand-picked group of food reformers - Cox, Bradley, and Miles - in their *Public Kitchens* handbook. The *Public Kitchens Handbook* may have been written by middle class vegetarians, but it erred on the side of caution and cultural sensitivity. It advised that to ensure long term popularity national kitchens should ‘bow to prejudice’ by serving established British meat-based dishes. The guidebook criticised the ‘appalling ignorance’ of the British people when it came to preparing attractive food, a ‘national disgrace’ which had led to the neglect of many different cuisines, most notably those of the ‘pleasant land of France - the shrine of all true chefs’. Yet foreign cuisines and the greater use of vegetables should be introduced only gradually, they instructed. Gravies should be prepared in the ‘British way’ - from the juices of their own meats - and not, ‘as in many restaurants where foreigners rule’, from a mixed meat gravy. Cox, Bradley and Miles, then, wanted to improve the national character through improving diet, increasing vegetable consumption and reducing waste; but they understood that to do so effectively British cultures of consumption had to be bowed to and the taint of foreign avant-gardism had to be avoided (Cox et al, 1917).

The term ‘public kitchens’ was significant in itself. The voluntary origins of ‘communal kitchens’ would soon be obscured by their patriotic rebranding. This was evident in the large communal dining centre opened by Queen Mary on London’s Westminster Bridge on 21 May 1917. It was described as a ‘Kitchen for All’, not a ‘Public Kitchen’. These were more than mere linguistic idiosyncrasies: the brave new world of communal dining would be riddled with the political and cultural anxieties echoed a generation later by Winston Churchill in his fears of its socialist undertones. Once again, the desire to ensure that national kitchens were broad-ranging in their cultural appeal was paramount.

The ‘Public Kitchen’, though, was soon to become a ‘National Kitchen’. In November 1917 Rhondda appointed a business friend of his, Charles Spencer, to head up a new division of the Ministry of Food devoted to mass dining (Beveridge, 1928: 46). Spencer, as he put it to Rhondda, was ‘not used to being chained up’. A self-styled man of action who adhered to the ‘do it now’ attitude of Kennedy Jones, he took on the project on the condition that it be ‘untrammelled by red tape’ and run as a ‘business proposition’. Determined to circumvent ‘municipal obstacles’ to the efficient running of national kitchens, Spencer declared himself in favour of employing ‘real hustlers’, if necessary, to make ‘quick work’ of the extensive surveying, building and engineering needed to establish a national network of kitchens. Spencer was all about ‘economy with efficiency’, promising Rhondda that ‘wasters or inefficients’ would be ‘fired out immediately’ (Spencer to Rhondda, 16 January 1918).

Spencer’s hard-headed business mind, it seems, was responsible for the name change. Spencer confessed to Rhondda that he did ‘not feel quite happy’ with ‘the word communal’. ‘Its association with Socialism is too well known, and I am afraid it is rather a handicap’. He suggested the following alternatives: ‘War Emergency Food Kitchens’; ‘War Food Depots’; ‘War Catering Depots’; ‘National Food Kitchens’; ‘Local Catering Centres’; ‘National Catering Centres’; ‘People’s Food Supply Depots’; ‘Local Food Kitchens’; and ‘Food Supply Depots’. From this unwieldy-sounding list, the ‘National Kitchen’ emerged (Spencer to Rhondda, 16 January 1918). In a newspaper interview a week later Rhondda confirmed the name change. ‘I do not like the term “communal” Rhondda told the *Manchester Guardian*; ‘I should much rather talk of central or national kitchens’. According to Rhondda, pre-echoing Churchill, ‘community kitchens’ implied, on the one hand, a culture of charity; on the other, communism (*Manchester Guardian*, 27 January 1918).

Somewhat paradoxically, the anti-communism of Rhondda and Spencer was expressed amidst increasingly statist measures in food control. In September 1917, under the extended powers of the Defence of the Realm Act, Rhondda had overseen the state takeover of food supply, control, pricing and distribution (Beveridge, 1928: 164). With the state taking on ever greater powers, Spencer worried about the potential of home-grown radicalism to subvert these controls. ‘The working classes are near breaking strain’ he wrote Rhondda, a situation which had materialised ‘since June 1917’. This provided another compelling reason for the name change. When he considered the prospect of hundreds of the great unwashed collecting together under one roof, Spencer worried about the potential for dissent. Instead national kitchen customers, he envisaged, would visit central depots, have their flasks or buckets filled with food, and return home to consume it (Spencer to Rhondda, 16 January 1918, TNA, MAF 60/310).

Spencer was something of a maverick, a technocratic Yorkshireman who stayed in post until January 1919, when he resigned citing the demands of his many other business interests, which – significantly - included tramways (*The Manchester Guardian*, 9 February 1919). He even envisaged the ‘travelling kitchen’, a form of ‘fast food’ whereby people would come to tramcars to receive food. In practice, however, the take-away model - whether doled out from behind a kitchen counter or tram window - was overtaken by canteen-style dining. The success of the Westminster Bridge canteen impelled Rhondda to press for the establishment of national kitchens ‘wherever possible’ (J.S. Middleton to J. Moore, 31 July 1917, PHMA, WNC 14/4/1/5). Spencer’s anxiety over the working class assembling together to dine was assuaged by Rhondda. Once safely rebranded ‘national kitchens’, Rhondda damped any fears of radicalism by promising that local businessmen could run them as commercial enterprises; local authorities would lend support, but these would be businesses first and foremost. Commercial nous would prevail, Rhondda insisted, in breaking down class and cultural barriers, bringing together not one but ‘all classes’ (*The Times*, 22 May 1917).

**Not a charity: achieving cross-class cultural appeal**

Spencer, too, was determined that national kitchens have a cross-class cultural appeal. He declared himself resolutely opposed to national kitchens becoming ‘class kitchens’ (Spencer to Rhondda, 16 January 1918). In an obsequious despatch to Rhondda, he argued instead that elite patronage would ensure popularity:

There is no one the working woman looks up to like a Lord. I have found it so in electioneering times. A Lord on a platform will draw more working women to any hall than anyone else. We should have to get noble Lords and Ladies to patronise the communal kitchens and have the fact well press-campaigned (Spencer to Rhondda, 16 January 1918).

Yet Spencer’s desire for noble patronage was not shared across the Ministry. The most significant instruction from the Ministry was that national kitchens were ‘not to be conducted as a charity’; rather, they had to function as a business, complete with a full set of accounts (HM Government, National Kitchens Order, 1918). Queen Mary may have opened the first ‘national kitchen’, then, but under the new scheme the charitable culture of the philanthropic ‘Lady Bountiful’ was very much a thing of the past. The Ministry of Food’s National Kitchens handbook, published in late 1917 as the number of state-subsidised kitchens grew, warned against any spirit of ‘condescension or patronage’ towards customers (Ministry of Food, 1917: 17). Kitchens would, on the one hand, avoid the taint of charity and, on the other, ‘be conducted without loss to the ratepayer or taxpayer’ (Cox et al, 1917: 14). These were to be popular ventures rather than schemes solely for the very poor.

In the earliest months of the scheme, most national kitchens were run by local businessmen and overseen by local government. National kitchens, as businesses, may have been managed locally but they were subject to direction by the Food Controller (Rhondda) and assisted by a Treasury grant. The grant initially covered a quarter of costs; a further grant was available once a kitchen had proved its financial viability. Kitchens were only deemed official national kitchens after proving to the Ministry over a number of months that they were viable financial concerns. Local authorities were then able pay back the loan via ten yearly instalments (Commons debate, 18 June 1918, vol 107, col 181).

As noted in a Commons debate of early 1918, working class women had performed the ‘pioneer work in starting public kitchens’ yet increasingly found themselves marginalised by the new system (Commons debate, 17 April 1918, vol 105, col 397). Voluntary communal kitchens run by working class women, from which national kitchens had sprung, could be established or re-established in the future, contended Spencer, but only if they subjected themselves to local authority supervision. Any non-affiliated communal ventures would not be Treasury funded. At the same time, Spencer the businessman was keen to disassociate the national kitchens division of the Ministry of Food from accusations of statist uniformity. He had no objection to setting up ‘special’ kitchens to target particular occupational groups such as city clerks; likewise culturally sensitive ‘special kitchens’ would also have to be established for areas in which Jews formed a majority of the population, he reasoned, ‘as their mode of living must be considered special’ (Spencer to Rhondda, 16 January 1918, TNA, MAF 60/310).

In towns and cities, national kitchens soon evolved into cheap restaurants. The initial policy that no food could be consumed on-site soon gave way to pressure and ‘national kitchens’ evolved seamlessly into cut-price restaurants. At the flagship ‘Kitchen for All’ on Westminster Bridge a small staff - two cooks, two kitchen-maids, a superintendent and a cashier - proved sufficient to cater for 2,000 people a day (Cox et al, 1917: 3). For speed, customers purchased coupons from a cashier upon entering the premises rather than handing over money after eating. Contact with ‘shippers and important dealers in the great markets’ meant that meat was procured at 25% of retail price - savings which were in turn passed on to customers (Cox et al, 1917, 13). Most national kitchens opened at lunch and dinner time (from 11.30am to 2pm and between 5pm to 8pm). Fish was the predominant dish for the evening meal. The sample lunch menu provided in the official National Kitchens handbook provided a uniform menu and price structure (Ministry of Food, *National Kitchens Handbook*, 1917: 23).

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| --- | --- |
| Sample menu (lunch) |  |
| Item | Price |
| Half a pint of Soup | 1d |
| Joint of meat (with entrees) | 4d (6d) |
| Scones | 0.5d |
| Side Vegetables | 1d |
| Puddings and cakes | 1d |

Another aspect crucial in differentiating national kitchens from soup kitchens was the need to make them culturally appealing. The Ministry instructed that each outlet ‘must not resemble a soup kitchen for the poorest sections of society’, but rather a place in which ‘ordinary people in ordinary circumstances’ could purchase an attractive yet cheap meal. Staff had to be well dressed and cooks experienced and the décor could not be chintzy. Gramophones and pianos were recommended to add to the ambience (Spencer to Rhondda, 16 January 1918, TNA, MAF 60/310). A report in the *Scarborough Post* on Hull’s central national kitchen encapsulated this:

The Hull people do not go into a back street. They avail of commanding premises in a good and busy thoroughfare, they fit their premises on modern lines, and there is no suspicion of shabby genteelness to be observed. On the contrary, were it not for the artistically painted signs you would never dream it was a National Kitchen. The place has the appearance of being a prosperous confectionary and café business. It is dainty and pleasing to the eye and the goods delivered are in appetising form. The business done is enormous. So far fourteen kitchens have been started in Hull… (Spencer memo, October 1918, TNA, MAF 60/310)

**National Kitchens Grow**

In December 1917, as food queues lengthened, sugar and butter were placed under local rationing schemes. As a prelude to the extension of rationing, which came in January 1918, Rhondda introduced flour and potato subsidies and empowered local councils to control food via locally appointed Food Control Committees (HM Govt., Local Authorities Food Control Order (no. 2), 25 February 1918). Food Control Committees (hereafter FCCs) were mostly composed of trade professionals and although required to contain at least one woman and one representative of labour, it has been claimed that working class women were largely absent from these new bodies (see Hunt, 2002). Arguably, the coming of FCCs represented a broader shift away from working class leadership on food supply problems to government control.

This change was reflected in the standardisation of national kitchens. The government’s ‘National Kitchens Order’ of 25 February 1918 instructed local authorities to establish national kitchens ‘as a matter of urgency and as a form of insurance against acute food shortage’. The Ministry of Food advised as to location: buildings with steam, such as public baths, were recommended, but location was left up to local initiative. For every large town or city, Spencer envisaged central kitchens (where cooking would take place) supplying a number of outlying ‘distribution centres’. Fluctuations in rationing and supplies, accompanied by national orders, meant - practically speaking - that any independent communal feeding venture now had to dialogue with FCCs in order to guarantee supplies. And now, more often than not, this meant coming under the aegis of Spencer’s national kitchens division of the Ministry of Food.

By mid-1918 the Ministry of Food was pressing local authorities to establish national kitchens and offering generous financial incentives if they did so. The largest national kitchen in London, in Hammersmith, could feed 50,000 people a day and the biggest in Manchester 3,000 (*The Manchester Guardian*, 10 September 1918). Even villages (of 1,000 people or less) were urged by the Ministry to turn their local kitchen into a village canteen. National kitchens could only be established, it ordered, in areas where there was sufficient population density and transport facilities. But villages were permitted to open so-called village canteens. Village canteens were also subject to special Ministry instructions: soup had to be accompanied by food items which could be easily ‘taken into the field’, for example Cornish pasties.

In July 1918 Glasgow Corporation appointed three of its civic officers to visit national kitchens across Britain and report back on their workings. The deputation presented its findings two months later. They showed that national kitchens were booming. In Birmingham there was one central kitchen and seven subsidiary kitchens; the largest seated 72 people and served 2,500 portions a day. Hammersmith’s massive central kitchen was doing a roaring trade. The deputation reported that the Ministry’s flagship kitchen on New Bridge Street in London was turning over a ‘substantial profit’ adding ‘there can be no doubt as to the success and popularity of the restaurant and the value received for the prices charged’ with queues to gain admission composed of ‘all classes of the community’ and stretching 100 yards up the pavement outside. The kitchens at Poplar, Holborn and Wandsworth were located in public baths but also proving very popular. In Brighton, the main national kitchen was predominately used by the ‘middle and lower middle classes’. In Leeds the city’s two kitchens were located ‘in a busy industrial area surrounded by many workshops in which girls are employed’. Sheffield boasted six kitchens; Nottingham eighteen; Middlesbrough three; and Bootle five. The deputation recommended national kitchens be adopted in Glasgow for three key reasons: economy of fuel, the nutritious value and affordability of the food, and economy of labour. Glasgow Corporation approved (Mitchell Library, Glasgow Corporation minutes, 27 September 1918).

By April 1918, it seemed that there was no stopping national kitchens’ bold forward march. The values of national kitchens were extolled at cinemas in propaganda organised by the Ministry of Food’s Economy section. Providing ‘object lessons’ for the public in how to manage want, the campaign bore all the hallmarks of Kennedy Jones’s ‘Do-it-now’ political ethic. Spencer announced that his division would avail of ‘tactful speakers, quick witted and forceful, to educate the people’ and show food economy films in schools (Spencer to Rhondda, 16 January 1918, TNA, MAF 60/310). The Ministry also recommended that national kitchens incorporate cookery instruction, another departure from the earlier take-away model, and the Ministry soon started poaching staff from domestic science colleges (National Kitchens Order, 1918).

However, with national kitchens expanding their operation as 1918 wore on, longer-term considerations to do with nutrition and public health (rather than the immediate provision of calories) began to feature in writings about national kitchens. A mid-1918 memo written by Marion Phillips, a member of the Women’s Labour League and the Consumer Council, reflected these anxieties. Phillips was generally supportive of the principle community dining, which she hoped would become a fixture of improved post-war housing estates. ‘Poor cooking noticeable in some kitchens’, noted Phillips, but in general she deemed them to be operating well. The Ministry’s kitchen in Poplar was a notable success, ‘well arranged, well-lit and beautifully clean’, noted Phillips, but its cultural appeal was limited because it was ‘situated in one of the public baths so will not last post-war’. (Phillips, Undated Memorandum, PHMA, WNC 14/4/3/1 i).

And yet there were would be greater problems for national kitchens than location and Phillips identified problems which were eventually to lead to the national kitchen’s demise. These challenges were borne of the extension of rationing, in particular meat rationing. With people now receiving meat via their ration, Phillips reported several cases where recipients refused to give up coupons for the meat on offer. In response, the department was attempting to arrange a new system whereby certain types of offal would be provided coupon-free (Phillips, Undated Memorandum, PHMA, WNC 14/4/3/1 iii). As detailed below, the national kitchens division of the Ministry of Food came to devote considerable time to the question of cooking techniques, dietary habits and public nutrition. However the steady introduction of a more comprehensive rationing system, as documented by Phillips, was soon to sound the national kitchen’s death knell.

**Offensive to a Culture of ‘Fair Play’**

In August 1918 Glasgow Corporation’s special committee on national kitchens was approached by a six-man deputation from the Glasgow District Restaurateurs’ and Hotel Keepers’ Association. The restaurateurs had gotten wind that the corporation was to buy a large restaurant in the city centre and run it as a national restaurant. This central location, they claimed, would be hugely detrimental to the restaurant trade in the city. What annoyed the Glasgow restaurateurs most was the location: the new national restaurant would operate not in the city’s slums but on the bustling Argyle Road (Glasgow Corporation minutes, 23 August 1918). This, they argued, was not merely a question of business rivalry but an affront to the British culture of ‘fair play’ in trade and commerce.

Spencer, for his part, did not see communal dining as a threat to private restaurants, insisting that they could co-exist and even buy cooperatively in order to pass on savings to customers and reduce waste (Spencer memo, October 1918, TNA, MAF 60/310). It was not an argument which held weight with restaurateurs. One private retailer wrote to the Ministry of Food claiming that he and his fellow businessmen had ‘done their bit’ for the war effort by providing hampers of food to the families of ‘exasperated, hungry men’, thus preventing a ‘good deal of trouble’; Spencer, by contrast, had avoided addressing the ‘real need’. And whereas he had ‘four sons and a grandson fighting for King and country’ Spencer ‘apparently a young, strong man’ with ‘no knowledge of catering whatever’ had enjoyed lavish state support and press backing for his advocacy of communal dining. Spencer had benefited personally from all this, claimed the food retailer, since the publicity surrounding national kitchens ‘must have been worth thousands of pounds to him as an advertisement’. Spencer’s national kitchens, according to this critic, had received ‘preferential treatment’ from the state, and this went against the British value of ‘fair play’. Here lay the rub. In a criticism of the culture of commerce that the national kitchen represented, national kitchens, he argued, were in fact un-British; Spencer had failed to ‘play the game’ (Pearce, undated, TNA, MAF 60/310).

Spencer was chastened by this accusation. If the introduction of full rationing in the summer of 1918 had diminished the appeal of communal dining, the opposition of the restaurant trade sowed fresh doubts about the future of state-subsidised communal dining. Looking to peacetime, Spencer insisted that national kitchens should not be allowed to die with what he anticipated as the return of laissez-faireism. With one eye on post-war unemployment, Spencer cited factory workers used to canteen food who would be laid off in peace time and would need cheap food. Spencer envisaged national kitchens continuing on as centrally funded institutions which could work with the private retail trade in wholesale purchase and distribution, thus driving down costs to the consumer. He also envisaged national kitchens enduring by taking over of coffee houses in large towns and cities. A further recommendation, which echoed Marion Phillips’ report, was that national kitchens be part of post-war housing projects in every local authority area. National kitchens could therefore work with the private retail trade for the national good, continuing to combat waste in all its forms: of labour, of material, of health, of energy (Spencer memo, October 1918, TNA, MAF 60/310).

Free Trade was a popular pre-war policy in Britain and the cheap white loaf it delivered a symbol of national pride. Somewhat paradoxically, this nationalistic pride in the cheap white loaf simultaneously celebrated foreign production within a global market system while scorning alien cultures of consumption (Trentmann, 2006). Thus the armistice of November 1918 was to provide another blow to the culture of wartime collectivism which the national kitchen model rested on. It was followed by the post-war winding down of the Ministry of Food and, with it, the forward march of the national kitchen was steadily brought to a halt.

At the turn of the year, a downbeat Spencer resigned as director (Ministry of Food, Kitchens Advisory Committee minutes, 17 December 1918, TNA, MAF 60/329.17). Kennedy Jones, who succeeded Spencer, accused the Yorkshireman of reckless expenditure and announced a series of cuts to the national kitchens apparatus. The Ministry began selling its sites around the country, in the meantime wrangling over a price for New Bridge Street restaurant with the private food retailers Spiers and Ponds (Ministry of Food Kitchens Advisory Committee minutes, 3 March 1919, TNA, MAF 60/329). Large council-run kitchens such as those in Marylebone and Hammersmith received eleventh hour financial support from the Ministry but, continuing to make a loss, eventually shut their doors (Ministry of Food Kitchens Advisory Committee minutes, 29 March 1919, TNA, MAF 60/329).

And yet amid the closures there were still new kitchens opening, demonstrating that there was still demand for the service that national kitchens provided in urban centres. In January 1919 the Ministry’s kitchens advisory committee was discussing the possibility of taking over the capital’s numerous civil service canteens (Ministry of Food Kitchens Advisory Committee minutes,, 19 February, 1919, TNA, MAF 60/329). The *Manchester Guardian* even claimed that national kitchens were being established at a greater rate after the war than during it (*The Manchester Guardian*, 4 January 1919). The post-war winding down of the Ministry of Food did not necessarily sound the death knell for national kitchens, insisted Charles McCurdy, Liberal MP and the department’s parliamentary secretary. He pointed to the cultural shift in dining habits which the war had delivered, calling for the state to continue providing cheap, hearty meals for the labouring masses in place of the ‘sloppy tea and teacake’ which was all that could be had for the same price before the experiment in egalitarian eating (*Manchester Guardian*, 12 April 1919).

Resisting the winding down of their department, civil servants at the national kitchens division produced a bullish internal newsletter boasting of the continued success of the ‘NK movement’. The language used was indicative of the forward-looking spirit which had accompanied egalitarian eating in wartime Britain and which many involved were now loath to now abandon. A thinly veiled contempt for what the authors perceived as the bourgeois character of post-war culture was clearly perceptible. The newsletter breathlessly reported the growth of communal dining worldwide, citing the ‘enormous public demand’ for cheap dining and disdain for ‘overcharging’ across Europe. ‘There are no rich people any more, we are all poor’, it proclaimed. The newsletter’s authors envisaged ‘competition with’ the private trade insisting that trade opposition ‘pales into insignificance’ compared to public demand for cheap, nutritious food (National Kitchens newsletter, MAF 60/50).

Yet central support was receding rapidly and more sites were closing than opening. It was claimed in parliament that several kitchens were running at a substantial loss (Commons debate, 7 April 1919, vol 114, col 1667). In May 1919 George Roberts, one of Rhondda’s successors as Food Controller, announced that central support for national kitchens in peace-time was not ‘appropriate’ (Commons debate, 6 May 1919, vol 115, col 796). At the signing of the armistice in November 1918 there were 363 officially registered national kitchens in Britain; six months later there were 120 less (Ministry of Food National Kitchens Branch, 30 April 1919, TNA, MAF 60/329). By early 1919 the National Kitchens Division had taken over catering in London’s royal parks: a further sign of the kitchens’ journey from popular and cheap communal ventures to established institutions. Sure enough, these catering units were soon charging more than affordable restaurants like Lyons. (Ministry of Food Kitchens Advisory Committee minutes, 26 May 1919, TNA, MAF 60/329). It was clear to all concerned that national kitchens had morphed into something quite distinct from their original purpose and, by late 1919, national kitchens had closed their doors for good.

**Conclusion**

National kitchens were part of an increasingly intensive state management of domestic affairs from late 1916 onwards (see Millman, 2000). With the government moving towards ever greater control of food pricing and distribution, communal feeding initiatives were swallowed up and regurgitated as national kitchens, in the process becoming part of the state apparatus. By mid-1918 the Ministry of Food was talking confidently of national kitchens becoming a ‘permanent national institution’ (Ministry of Agriculture, 11 April 1918). C.S. Peel, a co-worker with social reformer Maud Pember-Reeves, recalled the expectation that they would ‘become a feature of the nation’s life’ (Peel, 1929: 85). Writing to Rhondda on the cusp of the extension of rationing in January 1918, Spencer even recommended ‘taking over the House of Commons and House of Lords kitchens’ and running them as national kitchens (Spencer to Rhondda, 16 January 1918, TNA, MAF 60/310). Little more than a year later, however, their days were numbered. Spencer claimed that he had transformed a loose network of ‘scrappy’, ‘back street’ kitchens into a national movement (Spencer, October 1918). His successor, Kennedy Jones, didn’t see it that way and accused him of presiding over a division which kept incomplete financial records, was poorly organised, and spent profligately in a vain attempt to get local authorities behind the scheme (Vernon, 2007: 182).

According to Spencer, the demise of the national kitchen was all about class cultures. National kitchens had suffered from deep seated class and geographical divides, he claimed. He noted that, for all the Ministry’s efforts, many members of the working class still viewed national kitchens as soup kitchens and that they had proved more popular with the middle class. They had also proven most popular in London and south east England, where people were more inclined to dine out. This contrasted with the north of England, where the working class man generally travelled home for dinner in the middle of the day (Spencer, October 1918).

A more compelling reason for national kitchens’ decline was the stout opposition of the catering trade, which rejected any post-war moves towards cooperative purchasing and selling. A ‘very large majority’ of the caterers’ trade association envisaged a return to pre-war trade culture (Spencer memo, October 1918, TNA, MAF 60/310). With the coming of peace, national kitchens were viewed as interfering with ‘fair play’ in the market, which was represented as a quintessential British value. Opinions like these marched in line with the state’s broader movement towards de-control from 1918 onwards (Tawney, 1943: 1-30).

Rationing, however, provided the fatal blow to national kitchens. The introduction of full rationing in 1918 guaranteed fair shares on an individual basis; this, in turn, dampened the demand for cheap *communal* dining. By December 1918 Britons were enjoying sugar-coated cakes and double meat rations. The gradual lifting of rationing restrictions, so soon after their implementation, had a similar effect in making communal dining seem culturally less attractive.

Despite these trends, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that national kitchens could have persisted in the post-war period. To quote R.H. Tawney, ‘it did not follow that because some controls had had their day, others had no useful part to play in the post-war world’ (Tawney, 1943: 29). Against a post-war backdrop of increased unemployment, demand for cheap and nutritious dining was certainly widespread. Yet with the post-war downsizing of the Ministry of Food, leading to its 1921 disbandment and transfer of functions to the Board of Trade, the national kitchens division failed to find a new home. Written off as an extraordinary war measure, the ‘national restaurant’ - as national kitchens had effectively become - would not be revived until the next world war. The death of the national kitchen was, then, a question of political will rather than public indifference or cultural contempt.

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