The Years of Dearth, 1770–1772

Background knowledge for preparing lessons on Volume 02.

What happened?

Around 1770–1772, bad weather and failed harvests affected large parts of Central Europe. Grain also became scarce in the Ore Mountains. Prices rose sharply while many people had very low incomes. For numerous families, a supply crisis became hunger.

A simple chain of effects

Bad weather → poor harvest → less grain → higher prices → bread becomes difficult for poor families to afford → hunger, disease and migration.

What do the sources report?

- In 1771, a mild winter was followed by snow again in May and prolonged rain.
- Pietzonka gives a price of 10 talers for one Scheffel of rye in July 1771.
- In January 1772, Bohemia blocked grain exports to Saxony.
- For 1772, grass, tree bark and roots are described as emergency foods.
- Hunger and exhaustion were followed by disease and high mortality.

Carl Stülpner

Carl was a child during these years, so the crisis formed part of his real world. Specific dialogue and scenes in the book are narratively shaped. There is no securely documented date of death for Carl's father; Pietzonka considers it highly probable that he died during the famine.

For lessons

The crisis is particularly useful for teaching cause and effect: natural events do not automatically become famine. Stores, income, prices, trade and social differences also matter.

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