

Sisters and Comrades of the Land: A Gendered History of Agrarian Socialism in Hungary, 1890s-1920s

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Short Description

This ZARAH Component Study explores the organizing and activism of poor peasant women under the banner of socialism in Hungary, a predominantly agricultural country undergoing a series of political changes and ruptures, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The study establishes the pioneering role of rural working women and those claiming to represent them in addressing the poor remuneration and inhuman treatment of the masses of agricultural poor (day laborers and servants) as well as issues related to peasant women's unpaid work. The women organized and became active together with men and in their own women-only organizations from the early 1890s onwards, preceding the organization of women of the industrial working classes. The study presents the contours and profile of various clusters of activist women and explores their motivation to take up action and join men in their struggle for better living and working conditions. It showcases women's specific contributions to this struggle and reveals the agendas and repertoires of action they pursued in their own single-sex organizations. Women participated in various forms of action, including harvesters' strikes, alternative action towards the improvement of living and working conditions among agricultural workers, and the founding of communes. Agrarian socialism in Hungary involved women of diverse ethnic backgrounds and, in various combinations, class, gender and ethnicity played a key role in shaping peasant women's activism.

Building on a rich array of archival sources, contemporary papers, and other untapped, often local sources, the study thus examines within a common analytical framework the activism of poor peasant women in mixed-sex and single-sex organizational and activist contexts and engenders the history of labor activism pursued by the rural population in Hungary. It advances an inclusive understanding of the often-overlapping history of women's labor activism, valuing women's choices to organize within male-dominated institutions, women's cross-class networks or within their own circles without prioritizing one of these choices over the other. The study builds on and departs from the large body of literature on agrarian socialism and the existing works on women workers' activism that have been written mostly between the 1950s and the 1980s; these studies provide rich detail on left-wing activism among poor and landless peasants yet fail to address, beyond sporadic mention, the involvement of women. The historiography on women workers' activism does not discuss agrarian activism. The Component Study contributes to the new global labor history and to feminist historiographies of women's activism by shedding light on the yet unexplored activism of rural working women in Hungary.