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To cite this article: Eszter Varsa (2023) “The rulers are the causes of the war [...] They are the reason there is no bread in our town:” women’s food riots in the Hungarian countryside, 1917–1918, *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 31:2, 279-299, DOI: [10.1080/25739638.2023.2227515](https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2023.2227515)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2023.2227515>



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Published online: 26 Jun 2023.



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“The rulers are the causes of the war [...] They are the reason there is no bread in our town:” women’s food riots in the Hungarian countryside, 1917–1918

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ABSTRACT



The essay discusses women’s food riots in the Hungarian territories of the Habsburg Empire during World War I between spring 1917 and summer 1918. While the existing literature has primarily focused on urban contexts in a variety of European countries, this essay analyses the Hungarian countryside with a focus on small towns and villages where and around which inhabitants were mostly agrarian workers. The agrarian population was especially hard hit by the increasingly coercive wartime economic measures, and especially by the high cost of living and the break-down in food supply. Using archival sources and news reports, the article approaches food riots as a form of labour activism signalling (agrarian) women’s efforts to improve their desperate living and working conditions and, thus, as a local political response to the international and national political and economic crisis that unfolded in the Dual Monarchy shortly before its disintegration during the second phase of the Great War. It pays particular attention to participants’ social/ethnic background, agendas, and repertoires of action, including the antisemitic character of some of the riots and authorities’ reaction to these uprisings. The essay, thus, also examines the interactions between members of local-level (un)organized activism and regional and national governance.

KEYWORDS

agrarian women’s food riots; Hungary; First World War; antisemitism

In a short report to the lord lieutenant of Pest County dated 19 July 1918, the notary of Lajosmizse, a small town in central Hungary, described the situation caused by poor wartime food supply in the following words:

The unprovisioned segment of the population of Lajosmizse has been without bread for over two weeks and has been besieging our office for flour and food every hour of the day. Today hunger has tortured the mothers of five to six children to such an extent that they created an actual revolution at the town hall and attacked the public notary’s office so heavily that he could leave his office for the midday break only with the support of the gendarme. Since the population of our town cannot further endure the hunger, we kindly ask you to arrange the immediate distribution of food tickets so that the unprovisioned part of the population could

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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receive from the local representative of the [National] Office for Public Food Supply the portion of wheat that would be due on 30 September at once; otherwise, there is fear that the situation will escalate into an uprising or bloodshed within hours. (Report by the notary of Lajosmizse 1918)

The notary of Lajosmizse was alarmed by the openly expressed anger and violent protest regarding the unavailability of basic food items he daily faced from mothers who had been unable to provide for their children for several weeks. By the fourth year of the war, the country's population and especially working-class families with lesser means found it exceedingly difficult to make a living, even finding it challenging to purchase food. High inflation, the constantly increasing cost of living, families' lack of income due to the conscription of men into the army and low war relief payments, the uneven distribution of and limited access to food and other products of subsistence, and food tickets that failed to secure access to foodstuffs due to constant breaks in the supply chain were only some of the troubles people on the home front experienced (Bihari 2005, 2008a; Egry 2017). Fearing a likely riot and bloodshed, the notary demanded that higher authorities provide immediate food aid to families in need. While no further information is available concerning whether the women received the bread and flour in question, this occurrence signals that if they wanted to prevent an outbreak of violence, authorities had few other means to resolve such conflicts than to try to secure and distribute foodstuffs to the population. It also testifies to women's persistence and radical public action as they demanded that representatives of the state address their grievances.

Based on recent scholarship in feminist labour history and the history of women's grassroots activism, this essay addresses women's food riots that took place in the Hungarian countryside during World War One as a form of labour activism and, thus, as political in nature (Betti et al. 2022; Çağatay et al. forthcoming). Using an inclusive approach to labour activism, this article characterises the food riots that unfolded at the local level between spring 1917 and summer 1918, paying particular attention to the social and ethnic background of the mostly agrarian women participants, their agendas and repertoires of action, and state authorities' reactions to their demands.

This article tackles the interaction that took place between participants in local-level unorganised/spontaneous activism and regional and national structures of governance. Concerning this interaction, historian Veronika Helfert understands women's spontaneous bread riots in wartime Vienna as "ritualized practices," drawing attention to the performative aspect of citizenship in political collectives characterised by an unequal distribution of political rights (Helfert 2021, 92). This article argues that women's food riots in rural Hungary in the eastern half of the Habsburg Empire were political acts that demonstrated agrarian women's conscious action to draw authorities' attention to and increase the public's awareness of pressing conditions in their communities that were the consequences of the war and the government's mismanagement of the home front economy. It also shows that participants in the riots systematically identified local and national representatives of government institutions as responsible for the wartime public food supply and called on these politicians to take action to improve their (the rioters') situation. Through acts of violence and destruction, women threatened not only various authorities but also better-off members of society and the ruling elite,

whom they regarded as liable for their misery. These acts and activism included an important element that has barely been addressed in the existing scholarship, namely, antisemitism, which was expressed in the plundering of Jewish-owned stores for food, the destruction of both the food and the physical interior of shops, and in violent threats addressed to Jewish shop owners. Besides repressive measures, in numerous cases, women achieved partial success as some of their demands were met and they received immediate food aid. Peasant women's political action that was critical of wartime conditions points to their ability to shape their life circumstances.

The article analyses women's food riots in the Hungarian countryside with a focus on small towns and villages, where and around which the population mostly consisted of agrarian workers. In Hungary, two-thirds of the agrarian population were landless or small-holder peasants who made a living by working for better-off peasants or the owners of large estates. Regardless of the social strata to which they belonged, in this essay, the terms "peasants" or "agrarian workers" refer to all persons who carried out agrarian work to earn a livelihood. Relying on a close reading of state authorities' reports and the representation of women's food riots in the local and national press, this article analyses the following cases, which are randomly selected from the sources: A women's demonstration due to poor quality food held in Kecskemét on 15 May 1917; a riot over small daily food rations and bad quality bread in Mindszent on 20 May 1917 in which more than four hundred women participated; riots in the small towns and villages of Temes County (Timiș, Tamiš) due to the lack of and poor quality of flour that took place between May 29 and 6 June 1917; two women's riots driven by the demand to increase war relief payments and the daily ration of bread and flour in Hódmezővásárhely on January 18–19 and on 21 June 1918, respectively; large women's demonstrations due to the lack of lard in Kiskunfélegyháza between February 24th and 26th, 1918 in which four to five thousand people participated; a women's riot due to the lack of bread and flour in Lajosmizse on 19 July 1918; and the demonstration of two hundred women to protest the deterioration of the food supply held in Cegléd on 6 August 1918. Following a short, more general discussion of the existing scholarship on women's food riots in Europe and the situation of the agrarian population in Hungary during the First World War, this article first addresses representations of the social and ethnic background of the rioting women in rural Hungary. Subsequent sections explore demonstrators' agendas and repertoires of action, as well as how local authorities, in negotiation with regional and national-level officials, reacted to the demands of the protesting population.

Food riots and hunger strikes, among other forms of antiwar protest actions in which women took the lead, were widespread in Europe during World War One. Existing research on women's movements and (labour) activism related to the war has, to-date, concentrated primarily on urban contexts. It has described the changes in gender roles that accompanied both middle-class and working-class women's entrance into areas of wage labour previously dominated by men and its gendered consequences for the organisation of labour as well as workers' movements. Regarding women's wartime activism, gender historians have devoted considerable attention to the participation of middle-class and working-class women in national and international peace activism. In establishing the influence this activism had on wartime economic and social politics and the post-war political order, scholarship has also underlined the significance of food riots

and hunger strikes in which women publicly demonstrated their dissatisfaction with the scarcity of food and the state's inability to provide adequately for the population (Davis 2002; Dimitrova 2018; Heely 2004; Heumos 1999).

Research on Vienna has shown that women's hunger riots and demonstrations, a recurring phenomenon in the city since the summer of 1916, were seen as a potential threat to the stability of the home front even though they were presented as non-political by the authorities and the media (Helfert 2014, 2021). They highlighted the state's inability to satisfy the material needs of its population, which led to the undermining of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Heely 2004). This harmonizes with the sentiments in censored letters that reflected everyday people's – among them village inhabitants'—dissatisfaction with the Habsburg state due to the desperate wartime socio-economic conditions, especially those related to the scarcity of food and other basic supplies (Hanák 1988). Reports of women's demonstrations and food riots in localities in the eastern territories of the empire, such as the Czech and Slovakian lands, also warned about the possibility of unified demonstrations, strikes, and uncontrollable mass actions already in 1916 (Heumos 1999, 83).

Police and other state officials' reports about food riots and public dissatisfaction among the working classes due to the cost and lack of food in wartime Berlin pointed to the fact that as early as 1915, authorities were concerned with the economic war and Germany's possible defeat through economic means. Central to authorities' fears was the measurable discontent of the population with how the state managed prices and the food supply (Davis 2000, 2002). Similarly in Russia, the numerous subsistence riots that took place during the war and were led by and included mainly working-class women gained openly political dimensions by the second half of 1916. Rioters not only showed a lack of respect to authorities in general; they also turned against the war and the tsar. These events eventually contributed to the outbreak of the Russian Revolution. Wartime shortages had additional, specific meanings for members of the lower classes who largely came from rural milieus. Through bread riots, people expressed their "hostility to market forces that placed profit above the popular right to subsistence" (Engel 1997, 714). The working-class participants of food riots came from mixed backgrounds. Some were agrarian whereas others were factory workers (Dimitrova 2018; Engel 1997); further, as research concerning the situation in Sofia has shown, the riots mobilized women from different ethnic backgrounds, including Roma (Dimitrova 2018).

Whether addressing Western or Eastern European contexts, scholarship on hunger strikes and food riots during World War One has argued that in both their spontaneous and organised forms, these women's demonstrations need to be considered political in nature (Davis 2000, 2002; Dimitrova 2018; Engel 1997; Grayzel 2002; Helfert 2014, 2021; Heumos 1999). The dominant paradigm in Hungarian historiography concerning women's food riots on the other hand, however, conflicts with this interpretation. Labour historians writing between the 1950s and the 1980s adopted an approach that reflected the established vision of the history of the socialist and communist workers' movement which held that male-organised activism constituted labour activism. These scholars juxtaposed this male-dominated activism with women's actions, highlighting the spontaneous and "instinctive" nature of the latter. For example, historian Endre Gaál, the editor of a document collection on the history of the workers' movement in Csongrád

County published in 1969, created a section on women's food riots entitled "The Instinctive Revolts of the Relatives of the Conscripted Due to Wartime Deprivation" (Gaál 1969, 48). He used this categorization in a variety of his earlier publications on the subject as well (Gaál 1961, 1964). In his work on rural discontent in 1917 and the spring and summer of 1918 published in the 1980s, historian Ignác Romsics pointed out that riots mostly took place when the previous crop had been consumed but the new crop had not yet been distributed. He argued that such spontaneous food riots had "hardly ever [...] any direct political element in them"; they rather "served to fulfil instinctive and temporary [/seasonal] social demands" (Romsics 1989, 121; 2016, 51). Concerning the history of World War One in Hódmezővásárhely, historian Imre Makó has emphasised the distance between spontaneous women's riots and the organised workers' movement, claiming that "antiwar actions did not move beyond the level of the instinctive and did not meet with the support of the organised workers' movement" (Makó 1993, 929).

Most recently, a similar approach has supported the depoliticisation of the series of protests leading up to the Revolution of 1918 and the 1919 Republic of Councils in Hungary in a move to counter the position of historians who wrote about these events during the state-socialist period. Historian Attila Marosvári, for example, has stated that in the wave of violence that broke out in Csanád County in the autumn of 1918, which included women's food riots, "organised and conscious" forms of activism could not be detected "as would be expected in case of a revolution," and the events were not driven by "the open class struggle of peasants" (2022, 101). Despite identifying social inequality, repressed discontent, and indignation among the motivations behind violent actions, Marosvári has maintained that among other events, women's food riots were driven by "(crowd) instincts" (2022, 102, 112). Historian Károly Ignácz has, on the other hand, shown that wartime food riots signalling problems in public food supply that took place on the "outskirts of Budapest" were taken seriously by authorities; they led to administrative reorganisation and "significantly affected the administrative setup of post-First World War Hungary" (2020, 95).

This article builds on what historian Temma Kaplan has termed "female consciousness," that is, women's reproductive labour and responsibility for sustaining life, as the motivation for women of the lower classes "to act collectively in pursuit of goals they could not attain as individuals" (Kaplan 1982, 547). As Kaplan has pointed out, due to a lack of sources on such women's reasons for action, the focus of analyses often has fallen on their acts rather than their thoughts, which has led scholars "to associate irrationality and spontaneity with collective action" (548). Rather than branding women's motivation to participate in food riots as instinctive and, thus, apolitical, this essay approaches food riots as the means through which women communicated their and their families desperate living and working conditions to representatives of the state. Such actions were a local-level political response to the international and national political and economic crisis that unfolded in the Monarchy shortly before its disintegration during the second phase of the Great War. In their effort to prevent the destabilisation of the state during the war, authorities paid special attention to the situation on the home front. This created a context in which the riots did not simply

provoke repressive measures; rather, authorities tried to address the strikers' demands at least partially.

The situation of the agrarian population in Hungary during World War One

On the eve of World War One, the situation of agrarian workers, who constituted the majority of the Hungarian working population, was characterised by depressed economic and social conditions. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, the uneven distribution of land, which the development of capitalism in the agricultural sphere had only intensified, led to an increasing number of pauperised small landowners and landless peasants who could not make a living from their own plots. For example, in 1910, 4,816 large landowners owned more than 1,000 cadastral yokes of land, while 2,437,190 peasants owned 0 to 5 cadastral yokes (Gunst 1998).

During World War One, the situation of the agrarian population deteriorated. War-related emergency legislation that was activated across the empire gave the civilian government in Hungary new powers, which led to a more centralised form of governance than what had existed before (Deak and Gumz 2017, 1115). The strengthening of the statutory rights and executive power of the Hungarian government, however, was a process that had begun already in the 1910s (Bader-Zaar and Zimmermann [accepted for publication](#)). In certain rural regions following the waves of harvester strikes, a state of emergency was introduced as early as in the late 1890s, which put a high degree of executive power in the hands of local authorities (Pölöskei and Szakács 1962). New war-related legislation brought workers engaged in a variety of production areas under martial law.

Like elsewhere in belligerent Europe, women entered jobs previously dominated by men. In Hungary, the employment of women, also in the agricultural sector, increased starting in 1915. Peasant women, young girls, and children took over men's roles in ploughing, sowing, and harvesting. Act 1 of 1914 and Act 13 of 1915 introduced compulsory wartime work in agriculture. The former obliged not only women – including recipients of war relief – but also children and the elderly to perform agricultural labour (Pastor 1985). The government authorised local municipalities to draw on the labour power of the population on the home front for a pre-set payment. Consequently, women and children could be forced to carry out day-labour almost for free due to their newly defined obligations to the wartime economy (Zalai 2017a, 234).

While some wealthy peasants could profit from the war by accumulating surplus income from selling food (lard, flour, grain) at higher prices, the majority of agricultural labourers suffered from the loss of working hands and requisitions of their animals and produce starting in early 1915. The conscription of animals and agrarian workers into the army caused a decline in agrarian production. By 1918, for example, the wheat harvest had declined by 37 percent, potatoes by 40 percent, and sugar by 55 percent (Pastor 1985, 129). Between June 1914 and October 1918, the price of food and other basic products increased by between 200 to 1026 percent due to wartime inflation (Egry 2017, 294). Food stamps were introduced, but food shortages appeared already in the autumn of 1914, and by 1916 they became acute. The situation deteriorated even further by the late autumn of

1914, when Great Britain introduced a blockade on the import of goods to Germany (Davis 2000; Helfert 2021).

Act 45 of 1914 introduced war relief to families who, due to male conscription, had no wage-earning members present on the home front. However, payments were so low that they did not cover daily subsistence. Such payment schemes included children born out of wedlock, but they excluded unmarried partners until 1917–1918 (Zalai 2017b, 353). The first food riots broke out in the vicinity of Budapest already in the summer of 1915 (Ignácz 2020). By 1917, many poor peasant families could no longer purchase clothes or fuel (Romsics 1989, 120–121). As in belligerent Germany and Cisleithania, increasing problems with food supply and high subsistence costs led to the regular eruption of hunger riots across Hungary from 1917 onwards (Pastor 1985).

“A large group of women waiting at the town hall:” Agrarian workers from the countryside in the town centre

Authorities and journalists’ accounts of the food riots in the Hungarian countryside reveal that participants in these actions were predominantly women who belonged to “the unprovisioned” segment of the population. Concerning events that took place in villages and small towns, the rioters were referred to as poor agrarian women, for example, day-labourers and agrarian servants from the nearby homesteads. In the existing scholarship, their presence and protests at rural town halls represent an as-yet unaccounted for side of travel related to inadequate food distribution that took place between rural and more urbanised contexts in wartime Hungary. Historian Péter Bihari (2005) has drawn attention to both the phenomenon of middle-class households in the capital city hosting students from the countryside in exchange for in-kind payments of food (81) and the urban middle-classes travelling to the countryside to obtain food unavailable in the cities from peasants. Bihari cited the Hungarian author Gyula Illyés, who became famous for recording the misery of agrarian life in interwar Hungary, to illustrate the latter shocking phenomenon: “[...] city dwellers [were] standing in front of village door gates, like dogs waiting for a piece of bacon. They were begging for bacon, eggs, a little bag of flour, carrying the tailcoat of the head of the family, or a Persian carpet, a kitchen chair – everything they could move from home” (105).¹

The break-down of the public food supply in the second half of the war, however, also caused movement in the opposite direction. The agrarian population on the home front, who were predominantly women, adolescents, children, the elderly, and soldiers on leave, appeared at the administrative centre of their villages and small towns. Most often, it was women from villages and the nearby homesteads who went to the local Office for Public Food Supply to receive their food rations or to the town hall to receive their war relief payments, and it was they who protested against their desperate situation. For example, in a report to the Minister of Interior dated 21 May 1917, the mayor of Kecskemét described the women’s demonstration that took place six days earlier at his office at the town hall:

We were able to give no more than a 180-gram daily food portion per person to the unprovisioned population of our town since early December 1916. Exceptions could only

be made for workers in heavy industry producing for the war effort, who receive a 300-gram portion. The food supply we received did not allow for providing larger food portions to the agrarian workers, who are mostly women. [. . .] On 15 May at eight o'clock in the morning, a large group of women were already waiting at the town hall, demanding flour. Although I stated that their food tickets for flour were first due on 17 May, I ordered the distribution of the available [flour and bread] supply to prevent a more serious disturbance. [The women] stated that they had already run out of flour and bread due to the lack of potatoes and vegetables [i.e., other consumables], and since most of them were from homesteads, they would need to skip work to come back again on the 17th, and they and their children would be starving until then. (Report by the mayor of Kecskemét 1917)

When faced with the repeated and long-term fall out of the rationing of basic products, such as flour, bread, and lard, and the low and belated payment of relief, women expressed their discontent at or in front of the offices of local authorities. At Kiskunfélegyháza, a protest broke out on Sunday, 24 February 1918 due the insufficient provision of lard. The chief police officer of the town reported to the county lieutenant that the crowd in front of the town hall quickly grew to four to five thousand persons, “which also had to do with the fact that on a Sunday, a greater number of the inhabitants of the town and the surrounding homesteads gathered [there] to listen to the announcement of the latest pieces of official information.” He identified the rioters as mostly agrarian and market-women joined by young boys (Report by the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza 1918).

Sources also identified women protesters as poor peasant women, wives of day-labourers, and war relief recipients. In an open letter published by the Budapest daily *Nap* (*The Day*) on 18 May 1917, the deacon of Mindszent revealed the miserable working and living conditions of agrarian workers who, from early spring to late autumn, needed to earn their living far away from their home because they could not lease land from the large estates surrounding their home village. In this text, which ultimately resulted in the deacon's removal from his position, he criticised the local authorities of the village, describing how the suffering of “earthbound poor peasant wom[e]n with nine or ten family members” not only increased during the war due to the bad food supply but the “mothers of nine to ten children of Mindszent” were also treated disrespectfully by the district chief magistrate when they were “begging for bread” (Páhi 1967). The notary of Lajosmizse cited at the beginning of this article also wrote about the misery of peasant mothers with many children (Report by the notary of Lajosmizse 1918). In another action that took place in June 1918 in Hódmezővásárhely, a town in southeast Hungary that had a long tradition of (women's) agrarian socialist organising and activism (Varsa [under review](#)), the documents of the ensuing court case identified 150 women – “mostly the wives and family members of day-labourers” demanding an increase in their daily bread rations (Gaál 1964, 63) – who were joined in their attack on the local authorities by soldiers on leave (Report by the Hódmezővásárhely Office for Public Food Supply 1918). The court documents recorded the names of three women identified as agricultural day-labourers (Gaál 1964).

A series of reports about a women's demonstration that took place in Cegléd in August 1918 and local authorities' hard-nosed response that appeared in various local and national papers demonstrate that the question of who exactly the participants of these women's food riots were was a hotly debated issue. The case affected one of the

largest food riot-related scandals at that national level, which led to a parliamentary discussion about the inadequate system of food supply throughout the country. The socialist daily *Népszava* (The Voice of the People) (1918b) gave a detailed presentation of the events, including the lengthy debate between two MPs from opposing political sides and Prime Minister Sándor Wekerle's response. Whereas leftist MP László Fényes, who introduced the case, was critical of the break-down in the food supply and supported the cause of the rioting women, Kálmán Kovácsy, a priest and MP, and Wekerle went on the defensive and emphasised the crimes committed by the perpetrators of violence. As opposed to Fényes, who spoke about war relief recipients, Kovácsy and Wekerle opined that the rioters were a mob. These contradictory positions signal that war relief recipients were a respected category of women who could not be associated with unlawful behaviour. Historian Barbara Alpern Engel has drawn attention to the respected status of war relief recipients, who were mostly peasant women, in the context of wartime Russia. She has described how their husbands' military service gave these women a sense of entitlement and also provided them with a socially accepted basis for making demands of the authorities and requesting that their grievances be addressed (Engel 1997, 710). The governing elite in Hungary did not refer to the poor agrarian workers – such as the rioters in the cases discussed above, and the participants of the women's riot at Cegléd – as war relief recipients even if they may have been receiving this meagre support.

Some of the surviving documents and news reports indicate that participants in the women's food riots in the countryside had ethnically diverse backgrounds. Unlike in the coverage of hunger riots in Vienna (Helfert 2021, 116), the authors of the documents analysed here did not negatively or otherwise differentiate the participants of the riots according to their sense of ethnic belonging. For example, when the women rioters of Hódmezővásárhely were put on trial in Szeged in 1918, the court records named Mrs. István Reinhardt, whose surname hints at a German family background, as the main instigator of the riot (Gaál 1964) without connecting her central role in the events to her ethnicity. Similarly, in its report about the women's riot at Cegléd in August 1918, the national tabloid *Az Est* (The Evening) mentioned a woman named Rózszi Fehér, a "Gypsy girl," among the several women identified by name who had been arrested by the police (*Az Est* 1918). This was a brief reference without further details beyond the fact that, like the other women, she was arrested at night and was "pulled out of her bed" by the police. Importantly, this mention in the paper suggests that contrary to existing scholarship in Hungary, which has largely neglected the presence of Roma as agrarian labourers and members of agrarian communities, and in line with what historian Snezhana Dimitrova has emphasised concerning women's food riots in Bulgaria, Roma joined spontaneous protests in those localities where there were Romani neighbourhoods (Dimitrova 2018, 148).

"They would not leave until they received a definite promise about the issue of peace [and] the payment of increased war relief:" the agendas of women rioters

Women expressed their dissatisfaction with the management of the home front through their anger about the inadequate supply of food and its poor quality. They blamed local political representatives and lodged their grievances with them: They

called out the lord lieutenant, the district chief magistrate, the notary, and various members of the public administration, including the leaders of the local branch of the Office for Public Food Supply. A case in point are the riots that took place across the villages of Temes County (Timiș, Tamiš) in the late spring and early summer of 1917, during which the population demanded an increase in their daily flour rations and attacked the town halls and notaries (Report by the lieutenant of Temes County 1917).

Whereas riots had to do with repeated breakdowns in and the inadequacy of the food supply, the resulting lack, bad quality, and high cost of food and other basic necessities, and a call for increased war relief payments, women's demands pointed to issues that went beyond their immediate subsistence needs. They expressed their discontent with the difficulty of managing their reproductive work and demanded, for example, the return of their relatives from the frontlines and an end to the war. They also identified social inequalities as the root cause of their miserable condition and directed their anger especially at the ruling elite, whom they perceived as neglecting the plight of the poor.

Women's demands during the Hódmezővásárhely riot of January 1918 demonstrate that a single event could bring together several of these concerns. *Népszava* reported that women requested the lord lieutenant to arrange the immediate provision of firewood, which they had lacked for weeks, as well as the immediate payment of the increased amount of war relief – which had been approved by the government a few months earlier – and the improvement of the entire food supply system. Furthermore, according to the paper, the women also called for peace and displayed solidarity with their fellow rioters: “The demonstrators stated that they would not be leaving until they received a definite promise about the issue of peace, the payment of the increased war relief as soon as possible, the improvement of public provisions, and the immediate release of the four women demonstrators who had been arrested [during the riot]” (*Népszava* 1918a). Similarly, in Mindszent in May 1917, the approximately four hundred women about whom the lord lieutenant reported to the Minister of Interior initially turned against the representatives of the Office for Public Food Supply and members of the municipal assembly. They demanded an increase of the two-hundred-gram daily flour ration and complained about the poor quality of the bread that contained 60 percent corn flour. Then the crowd attacked “public buildings and private homes” (Report by the lord lieutenant of Csongrád County 1917).

Women involved in the Hódmezővásárhely riots in June 1918 coupled an attack on the police and representatives of the Office for Public Food Supply with a more general social critique directed at the ruling elite as the cause of the inadequate food supply and the war (Gaál 1964; Report by the lord lieutenant of Hódmezővásárhely 1918). The surviving documents of the ensuing court case² mentioned above testify to women's expressions of discontent about the reduction of the daily rations of bread as well as speaking out against “the rulers” in general (Gaál 1964). The police arrested the fourteen-year-old daughter of a day-labourer because she was “inciting the crowd” by shouting: “Give me bread!” (Gaál 1964, 63). The crowd attacked the head of the Office for Public Food Supply when he tried to calm the women by distributing food tickets for egg barley instead of bread. The police also arrested two other women day-labourers who were scolding both

them and the town leadership while queuing up for bacon in front of a butcher shop. Among the demonstrators in front of the town hall was the above-mentioned Mrs. István Reinhardt, a day-labourer who was reported to be heckling the “the rulers” and accusing them of being “the causes of the war” and “for having no bread in [the] town” (Gaál 1964, 63).

“The simple-minded women” as highly receptive to agitation: antisemitic attacks against Jewish merchants

Part of the rioters’ agenda was to protest price gouging and profiteering at the expense of the poor, issues that had been repeatedly associated with Jewish merchants as well as peasants and market-sellers since the beginning of the war. Antisemitism increased during World War One throughout Europe including the Hungarian territories of the Dual Monarchy. As historian Péter Bihari has shown, from the summer of 1916 onwards, there were repeated accusations associating “Jewish capital”—i.e. bankers and merchants – with price usury and profiteering in the Hungarian parliament as well as in the written media, including daily papers starting in 1917. Catholic weeklies and monthlies picked up on the “Jewish Question,” relating it to scandals around poor-quality military supplies as early as 1915 (Bihari 2008a, 2008b).

Labour historiography on the workers’ movement written during the state-socialist period in Hungary attempted to represent such riots as having purely socio-economic motivations. The multi-volume document collection on the history of the Hungarian workers’ movement compiled during the 1950s and the 1960s reproduced a report about the women’s riots at Kiskunfélegyháza between February 24 and 26, 1918, but the editors of the document collection removed all references to the fact that the specific merchants attacked by the rioters were of Jewish origin (Summary report by the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza 1918). The full version of the same document can be found, however, in a document collection edited in the 1980s, by which time research had already thematized the antisemitism that characterized these attacks (Romsics 1982).

Participants in the women’s riots at Kiskunfélegyháza accused merchants of cheating the people by withholding their products or selling them elsewhere to obtain higher profits. As the surviving documents show, state authorities were aware of the fact that complaints about the lack of access to food and the high prices implied antisemitism. In his report to the lieutenant of Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun County, the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza described in detail the damage to Jewish-owned stores caused by the rioters. In fact, he identified an “attack against the Jews” and “related to that, an attack against and the destruction of the property of the well-to-do and especially the authorities” as the main driving force behind the riots. He wrote that the violent events started when a shop manager named Izsák Schwéd, whose name suggests he was of Jewish origin, could not maintain order among those queuing up for lard “that had not been distributed for over a week even though the people had food tickets for lard.” The crowd stormed the shop, shouting: “‘Last week too we got neither meat nor lard’ and ‘The Jews and the rulers receive both meat and lard.’” When Schwéd escaped to a café near the town hall, the crowd began to smash in the windows of the building while scolding the rulers and the Jews” (Report by the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza 1918). The

rioters stole food and money as well as destroyed food and other products and the inner furnishing of several Jewish-owned groceries and other stores in the town centre.

The available sources concerning the events at Kiskunfélegyháza suggest that authorities and the local elite were critical of antisemitism and blamed it on particular types of political actors and forms of agitation. The chief police officer explained that the inequality between having a price cap on the produce of “the productive population” and market products while there was “no price cap on industrial products and merchandise” exposed the population to price gouging even though, as he added, “the merchants did not abuse [this situation]” (Report by the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza 1918). His report devoted a longer paragraph to clarifying that the antisemitic interpretation of price gouging and the inequalities in access to food which had led to the attack on Jewish-owned stores was partly provoked by a right-wing politician: “On an agitation tour for the founding of a Christian newspaper and the Christian media movement, Béla Bangha³ gave an inciting speech.”

The newspaper of the leading political party’s local organisation (The Party of National Work of Kiskunfélegyháza) published a lengthy article analysing the discussion about the reasons for the riots that took place in the municipal general assembly. It reveals that antisemitism was present among assembly members but was not accepted by the mayor. When, according to the paper, one of the assembly members questioned why the right to sell lard and schnapps was given to certain merchants, claiming that “the population [was] unhappy about that,” the mayor retorted: “Your problem is actually why these [rights] were given to Jewish merchants. Be assured that none of them cheated the population. There are good and bad persons among the members of all denominations.” The mayor’s liberal attitude towards Jews reverberates with what historian Robert Nemes has found concerning a controversy around Galician Jewish refugees in wartime Nagyvárad (Oradea), a city in eastern Hungary (2014). The fact that the local elite, among them the mayor, had patriotic values that extended to “Nagyvárad’s many religious and ethnic groups” and held that they “had always lived in peace and come together in moments of crisis” (Nemes 2014, 240) prevented the eviction of the refugees, which had been called for by a minority of the city’s councillors.

The chief police officer’s report also reveals the entanglement of the categories of gender and race in the interpretation of the causes of the riot. It highlights that the rioters were mostly women, more specifically local market-women selling their products in the capital city, and young boys, as well as agrarian workers from the nearby homesteads. In analysing the representation of women’s hunger riots in wartime Vienna, Veronika Helfert has underlined that references to the dominance of women and young boys in these crowds was a strategy police and news reports used to depoliticise the meaning of such events (Helfert 2021). In the context of Kiskunfélegyháza, the officer’s report included references to agrarian women and market-women to downplay the political weight of Bangha’s antisemitic agitation and incitement of hatred against the Jews, who he had identified as the main reason for the riots. Indeed, the report depicted the women as especially receptive to antisemitic agitation: “The speech [by Bangha], which had not given the police a reason to interfere at the time, nevertheless instilled strong antipathy against those not belonging to the Catholic faith in the souls, behaviour, and feelings of

the simple-minded women present at the meeting in great numbers” (Report by the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza 1918). This sentence contrasts the judgement of the police, who opted to take no action against Bangha during his tour stop in Kiskunfélegyháza, and the “souls” and “feelings” of the “simple-minded women.” Attributing the antisemitic character of the riots to the emotional (over)reaction of women makes the events sound harmless.

Violating gendered norms of behaviour: women rioters’ repertoires of action and authorities’ reactions

Women were often described as being very loud, impulsive, and emotional in the events leading up to and during the riots. Such a description of women participants in riots was already quite typical in Hungary by the end of the nineteenth century (Varsa [under review](#)) as well as for food riots in other European contexts, such as Vienna or Berlin, during the First World War (Davis 2000; Helfert 2021). As Veronika Helfert has pointed out concerning women’s food riots in the capital city of the Habsburg Empire, political action was associated with men’s institutionalised forms of (labour) organising. Women’s behaviour in these spontaneous riots was seen as violating middle-class gender norms, and it was categorised as an irrational expression of feelings rather than a form of legitimate political agitation (2014). For example, the mayor of Kecskemét explained that despite his attempts to calm the women, who were complaining about a lack of flour and bread, they gathered in front of the town hall and “were very loud. A group of women ran inside and gathered in front of [his] office [..]” (Report by the mayor of Kecskemét 1917). Similarly, women in Kiskunfélegyháza were reported to be “loudly demanding relief from the councillor of the Office for Public Food Supply” (Report by the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza 1918). News and authorities’ reports about the women’s riot at Hódmezővásárhely in June 1918 emphasised that a woman day-labourer was the fiercest participant, shouting: “We should beat all rulers and all police to death. [...] They should be taken to the front. (Gaál 1964, 63).

Authorities also emphasised that women were cursing at public officials, the police, merchants, and the wealthy (Gaál 1964; Report by the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza 1918). They detailed women’s violence: attacks on and the injuring of public officials and the police; throwing stones at the town hall and smashing its windows (Gaál 1964; Report by the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza 1918; Report by the lord lieutenant of Csongrád County 1917); attacking the buildings and homes of the well-to-do and ruling elites in the town centre (Gaál 1964; Report by the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza 1918; Report by the lord lieutenant of Csongrád County 1917) and the private homes of state authorities (Népszava 1918b; Report by the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza 1918; Report by the lord lieutenant of Csongrád County 1917; Report by the mayor of Kecskemét 1917). The documents of the aforementioned Szeged court case referenced the violent phrasing two women arrested during the Hódmezővásárhely riots in June 1918 used as they walked alongside the crowd of demonstrators in front of the town hall. They were reported to have shouted: “Damn you for arresting us! We should beat you to death together with all the rulers” (Gaál 1964, 63).

On the Hungarian countryside, it was precisely the identification of women with non-political spheres of life and their violation of gendered behavioural norms that gave food

demonstrations their political meaning. Some journalists, for example, used the trope of women's non-political nature as a silent reference to the political seriousness of the issues addressed by the women demonstrators. Describing the food riot that broke out at Erzsébetfalva, a small town close to the Hungarian capital of Budapest in early August 1917, the national daily *Világ* (The World) reported: "It is scandalous that so near to the capital, the food supply is bad even though there is food [available]. It is an even greater scandal that it took four thousand women demonstrators to provide flour rations that could have been made available in five minutes" (Világ 1917).

Politicising the act of rumourmongering in the context of the great peasant riots of 1907 in Romania, historian Irina Marin has argued that "in making things up, the peasants postulated a source of authority and then acted on it" (Marin 2018, 42). Based on rumour theory, Marin has claimed that rumour mills were not "signs of [peasants'] miscomprehension" but their means to exercise agency and take control over the events (Marin 2018, 14). Historian Attila Marosvári has reported about the "significant role" of various rumours in provoking violent action in Csanád County in 1918. A widespread rumour during the war that continued to circulate in the months leading to the Revolution of 1918 and had resulted in attacks against notaries and other authorities was that these officials had told the women asking for relief payments "to go grazing" (Marosvári 2022, 27–28, 140, 180).

In describing the places peasants exchanged ideas, Marin has emphasised locations like the village pub, the railways, gatherings on occasions when literate persons read and interpreted the newspapers to peasants, as well as the figure of the peddler who moved from village to village selling household items to peasants. She has not addressed, however, the gendered division of these spaces and the possible effects this gendering could have on men and women's participation in spreading rumours. Scholarship on



Figure 1. People queuing for potatoes in front of the Market Hall in Rákóczi square in Budapest in 1915. Photograph by: János Müllner, Fortepan/National Széchényi Library [Országos Széchényi Könyvtár], Budapest, Hungary.

women's labour activism has discussed the spreading of rumours as one of the repertoires of action women successfully employed to intimidate authorities. Gyöngyi Farkas, writing about agrarian women's opposition to collectivisation in state-socialist Hungary, described how authorities recorded women's production and dissemination of "terrible-rumours" as one of the most frequent "hostile activities" Women often referred to information "from other villages," only some of which was true (Farkas 2016, 50). As opposed to a culturally essentialising interpretation of rumour dissemination, according to which women were gossipy by nature, Farkas called attention to the multiple and diverse forms of relationships women had with each other. As they were women who sold agrarian products at markets, they had the opportunity to exchange information and rumours as friends, neighbours, and businesswomen.

In World War One-era Hungary, these women bore the brunt of providing for their children, and they were especially burdened by the consequences of the wartime breakdown in the food supply. As Figure 1 illustrates in the context of the Hungarian capital city, the queues in front of butchers and greengrocers and at the market were populated by women. They had first-hand experience of the hardships associated with obtaining food as well as the lack of respect they received from authorities when they complained to officials about their situation. These spaces were, thus, sites where women exchanged information about the causes of these problems.

Existing research on the historical role of rumours has called attention to the intersection of gender and race in their use, referring to notions of family and other gendered narratives that sparked outbreaks of violence during racial disturbances (Johnson 1998). Examining race riots in the twentieth-century United States, historian Marilyn S. Johnson has argued that understanding how race and gender are in a "mutually constitutive relationship" in rumours helps us understand "why riots occurred the way they did" and what the difference was between men and women's participation in such violent actions (Johnson 1998, 253, 272). In the context of antisemitic violence in rural Hungary during World War One, the widespread stereotype about Jews murdering Christian children resulted in violent attacks against Jewish merchants. Marosvári has described a case at Makó in August 1918 when some women accused an orthodox Jewish merchant of having coaxed a twelve-year-old servant girl to come in his house in order to take and use her blood for ritual purposes. The windows of and fence around his house were already smashed by the time it became clear that the girl in question was safely at home (Marosvári 2022, 168–169). This account reflects the key role the gendered notion of the family – as represented by the child in this case – played in antisemitic prejudice and the violent action in which women participated.

Existing sources concerning rural discontent about food supply in Hungary during the Great War suggest that in the wartime context, local mayors and notaries and other public officials tended to at least partially address rioters' grievances. While the gendarmerie, police, and occasionally soldiers were mobilised to disperse demonstrators and prevent further rioting, authorities were more willing to negotiate with these rioters than in the cases of riots that were sparked by agrarian workers' discontent with their living and working conditions in the prewar era (Varsa, [under review](#)). They tried to calm the angry crowd by offering immediate one-time food aid and distributing available food resources. Local authorities, furthermore, often referred to circumstances beyond their control, such as the nationwide breakdown of the food supply chain and failures at the higher levels of

decision-making. For example, in Hódmezővásárhely, the lord lieutenant blamed the enemy for the war: “He expressed his great desire for peace but stated that the reason for the continuation of the war was to be found on the side of the enemy” (Vásárhelyi Reggeli Újság 1918). Shining a positive light on local politicians, the government-friendly paper of the town also added that “Lord Lieutenant János Justh addressed the very embittered crowd from the balcony, informing them that the government decree on the increase of war relief has arrived, but that it takes a while before authorities can process the cases of the nine thousand six hundred [entitled] families.” He “assured [the crowd] that he would urge the swift execution of this task” (Vásárhelyi Reggeli Újság 1918).

Justifying their local-level action and demanding support from higher state representatives, local authorities referred to the explosive atmosphere and the danger of the population’s escalating aggression. In a report to the Minister of Interior on 21 May 1917, the mayor of Kecskemét described the women’s demonstration that had taken place six days earlier at his office at the town hall with reference to earlier rumours that turned out to be true: “[. . .] women were complaining at my office once again, and rumours were spreading that something would happen on 15 May. On 15 May at eight o’clock in the morning, a large group of women were already waiting at the town hall, demanding flour” (Report by the mayor of Kecskemét 1917). Calling on the Minister of Interior for an improvement in the food supply and the strengthening of the local police force, the mayor added that “reliable sources have reported that unknown women, who in the absence of a police force could not be arrested, have claimed that they were going to set the town and the town hall on fire, and that these plans needed to be carried out at night when the rulers were not present” (Report by the mayor of Kecskemét 1917).

Conclusions

This article has focused on the representation of women’s food riots that took place in the Hungarian countryside during World War One, paying special attention to the role of agrarian women in these events. The protest actions of the agrarian population in which women played a prominent role enhances our understanding of the population and the management of the home front in wartime Europe as existing scholarship has, so far, mainly focused on urban contexts such as Paris, Berlin, or Vienna.

By the second half of the war, the high cost of living, breakdowns in food supply, and the burdens placed on agrarian workers in the wartime economy mobilised peasant women to act in order to secure their and their families’ subsistence. Agrarian women appeared regularly and in great numbers at public offices, and they formed a visible and, for authorities and the ruling elite, a disturbing presence in the centre of villages and small towns. Reports about women’s riots suggest that participants used different means to call authorities’ attention to their concerns and to express their anger. In all the examined cases, rioters addressed their demands and complaints to various representatives of public offices.

In their reports, authorities and journalists described women as loud and violent and accused them of storming the town hall, attacking public officials and the police, damaging public buildings and even the private homes of the ruling elite out of desperation. Local notaries, mayors, and representatives of the Office for Public Food Supply, as well as

authorities at the regional level – such the chief police officer, the lieutenant, and the lord lieutenant – used the gendered silent reference to women’s non-political nature as a way to secure support from their superiors. News reports emphasizing the dire situation, which required an urgent response by the state, whether published by the leftist *Népszava* or the press organs supporting the (local) government, differed only in their evaluation of the role played by politicians in managing the crises on the home front.

The food strikes during World War I were the first time that authorities did not react heavily towards the agrarian population following a strike or riot; rather they addressed, at least partially, their demands. This could be chalked up to wartime concerns about possible sources of state destabilization and the situation on the home front. The sources examined have thus shown that through vulnerable public officials and the media, local agrarian women were able to make themselves heard and provoke a response from various levels of state governance. Authorities described women’s violence as supported by other groups on the home front – e.g. soldiers on leave and youth – in order to increase the number of gendarmes and police officers stationed locally and to put pressure on officials at the regional and national level to improve the public food supply. In the wartime context, revolts of the agrarian working classes and what the ruling elite perceived as the mob frequently guaranteed an effort by local authorities to immediately alleviate their grievances.

Riots had been a part of the agrarian working classes’ repertoire of labour activism since the late nineteenth century in Hungary. While existing scholarship points to the long-term presence of certain gendered elements in labour protests such as women’s role in spreading “terrible rumours,” further research is needed to elaborate the ways that gender and race intersected in women’s and men’s labour activism. Moreover, a further examination of the connection between riots in the countryside and other mass demonstrations and actions of the organised labour movement could contribute to a better understanding of agrarian women’s political activism.

Importantly, agrarian protesters were not a homogenous mass. Besides the gendered character of the riots, the sources also provide information about the ethnically mixed composition of their participants as well as their antisemitic agendas. Local studies that focus on so far marginalised contexts outside the capitals and large cities, which have received the most scholarly attention thus far, can help us better understand the causes and the meanings of antisemitism and its intensification during the First World War. The sporadic references in documents concerning Roma are significant for addressing their absence in scholarship concerning agrarian life and altering the perception that they were passive victims of administrative harassment and persecution.

Notes

1. The English translation is by Péter Bihari.
2. In the 1960s, historian Endre Gaál located the documents entitled “Mrs. István Reinhardt and Companions’ Incitement to Class Hatred” among the surviving material of the public prosecution of Szeged from 1918 at the National Archives at Szeged (today Csongrád County Archives of the Hungarian National Archives at Szeged) under the call number IV. 1918–2596 (Gaál 1964, 60). Unfortunately, these documents have disappeared since then.
3. Béla Bangha (Nyitra [Nitra], Slovakia, 1880–Újpest [Budapest], Hungary, 1940) was a Jesuit friar who devoted much of his career to the establishment of a strong Catholic public life, with an emphasis on the Catholic media in interwar Hungary as well as internationally. He was

well-known among his contemporaries for his militancy and outspoken antisemitism (Bihari 2008a, 2008b).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 833691). I would like to especially thank Attila Marosvári at the Csongrád County Archives of the Hungarian National Archives [Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Csongrád Megyei Levéltára] at Makó for providing me with his manuscript on uprisings in 1918, including food riots by women, and his help locating sources about Csongrád County in 1918. I also thank the anonymous reviewer and members of the ZARAH research team for their constructive and very helpful comments on a first draft of this paper.

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