

FOOD IN WAR TIME TRANSYLVANIA IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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ABSTRACT

THIS STUDY AIMS TO REVEAL A PIECE OF ALIMENTATION'S HISTORY: THE FAMINE DURING THE WAR IN TRANSYLVANIA, AND IS BASED UPON SOURCES LIKE: DIARIES, LITERATURE, MEMORIES AND PRESS. AS HYPOTHESIS, WE'VE STARTED THIS RESEARCH CONSIDERING THE COMMON KNOWLEDGE THAT ANY WAR IMPLIES FAMINE FOR THE TERRITORIES AFFECTED AND THE SOURCES CONSULTED CONFIRMED THAT. TRANSYLVANIA FACED FAMINE DURING THE WAR, AND THE MILITARY IT WASN'T ONLY COMPONENT OF THE SOCIETY AFFECTED BY IT, CIVILIANS ALSO SUFFERED DEPRIVATIONS.

THE SOURCES CONSULTED OFFERED US THE POSSIBILITY OF RETRIEVE SOLDIERS' MENU. THEY WERE FEED WITH BISCUITS, BEANS AND LOW QUALITY BREAD, BUT THE REGIMENTS WERE DEFICIENTLY SUPPLIED BECAUSE SUPPLY TRUCKS WERE OFTEN ATTACKED BY THE ENEMY. WHEN FAMINE STROKED, SOLDIERS ROBBED FARMS TO TEMPER THE HUNGER, ATE CEREALS HARVEST FROM THE FIELD OR SIMPLY STARVED.

THE CIVILIANS WERE ALSO AFFECTED BY THE FAMINE BECAUSE THE AGRICULTURE FACED FAILURE DUE TO ITS DEPRIVATION OF THE MANPOWER, ROBBERIES OF THE SOLDIERS, REQUISITIONS AND SOCIAL INSTABILITY. FURTHERMORE, THE AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN EMPIRE'S ECONOMIC MEASURES LIKE REQUISITIONS, PRICE CONTROL, PROHIBITION OF MEAT AND FATS AND FUNDRAISINGS PUT IN DIFFICULTY EVERY MEMBER OF THE SOCIETY. THE RESOURCES WERE REDIRECTED TO THE ARMY AND THE CIVILIANS' MARKETS REMAINED EMPTY. THE ALIMENTS SOLD ON THE BLACK MARKET WERE EXPENSIVE AND EVEN DANGEROUS SO SURVIVAL WAS TO BE SEEN ONLY IN PEACE MAKING.

THE SOURCES DESCRIBED A SOCIETY DEPRIVED OF FOOD. EVEN IF WE CAN'T EQUALIZE CIVILIANS' LACK OF RESOURCES WITH THE FAMINE OF THE SOLDIERS, IT'S SAFE TO SAY THAT TRANSYLVANIAN TERRITORY FACED FAMINE DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR.

KEY WORDS: WAR, FOOD, FAMINE, SOLDIERS, CIVILIANS, ECONOMY, AGRICULTURE.

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INTRODUCTION

The First World War, due to its amplitude, its span and the resources it implied, it generated the attention of every historian who was concerned himself with the analysis of the XX century. Subjects like: outbreak, reasons of the outbreak, war strategies, camps' forming, main battle's theatres and alliances and so on were priorities. Slowly, the historiography adopted the Annales' spirit and the priorities changed. Historians got interested in subjects like: war's influence over economy, over civilians and daily life during war. At the boundaries of daily life and economic history, the contemporary historiography created a new field of expertise: food's history in war time.²

Romanian historiography, following the contemporary trends, has vaguely touched those new subjects. Ioana Elena Ignat³ and Eugenia Bârlea⁴ attempted, in their studies economic aspects like: food stuff's prices, requisitions, black market and daily life's aspects that could be used in the large context of food's history.

This study aims to prove how people perceived food and daily diet during the First World War (1914-1918) in Transylvania, a part of Austro – Hungarian Empire by then. Because soldiers and civilians had been involved together in the strife, we would analyze both categories' diet. As sources, we used journals, diaries, literature and mail.

A war, no matter its amplitude, determines, on one hand, the concentrations of the young men, which means depriving economy of its main manpower. In agriculture, the lack of men meant uncultivated land because the field's work has been done by then only with primitive tools and using animals as driving force, a work incompatible with women, children and old men's strength. In the industrial field, that meant the lack of an important manpower, especially in the assignments which implied physical force needed considering its new orientations towards making guns and ammunition.

Another important consequence of the war was its instability. Small wars were developed only in the trenches, but the two world wars exceeded it. The continuous

² Dewey P. E., „Nutrition and living standards in war time Britain” in *The Upheaval of War: Family, Work and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918*, ed. Winter J. M., Wall R., (Cambridge, 1988), passim; Winter, J.M., „The Impact of the First World War on Civilian Health in Britain”, in *Economic History Review*, Vol. 30, 1977, passim.

³ Ioana Elena Ignat, „Civili în război: controlul prețului la alimente în Transilvania în primul război mondial (reflectat în presa românească)”, in *De la lume adunate...*, ed. Crucița-Loredana Băciu, Anamaria Macavei, Roxana Dorina Pop, (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2011), passim.

⁴ Eugeniei Bârlea, „Perspectiva lumii rurale asupra Primului Război Mondial”, (Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut, 2004), passim.

displacement of the troupes disturbed the daily life of the civilians because of the robberies and the destructions suffered by their cultivated land.

The costs of the war included food among the ammunition. For an ordinary war, that wasn't a big problem, but during the First World War, alimentation was an important issue and the government had to deal with it. Requisitions were ordered for almost every food stuff.

I. SOLDIERS' FOOD DURING THE FIRST WORD WAR

The main concern of a soldier was surviving the battle. To survive in the trenches implies heart, spirit and luck, but to get there, soldiers needed to exceed the rough conditions of life. The precarious hygiene, bad quality food, the inadequate intake put the soldiers in a double fight for survive; they had to shun not only of the ammunition of the enemy, but also of the starvation.

Ion D. Isac, in his memories, evoked his rough experience that he had on the front for conquering Transylvania. It was not only technical issues that he mentioned; he also remembered fighting famine, hardly surviving. The supply for the soldiers of his division was done deficiently and sometimes they got to starve because the food never got there or it got very late.⁵ The supplying day was a holiday because they were receiving soup made two days before, cleaved to the cauldron and two breads each.⁶ Ordinary, their daily diet consisted in biscuit and water.⁷

Romanian soldiers considered themselves lucky receiving supplies, even when they could eaten biscuit because there were days when they hadn't eat anything. In one of these unfortunate days, they captured a German truck with supplies. That day, they ate tea with rum and bread.⁸

In exchange for daily food and some money, soldiers worked on farm near trenches. Alexandru Vasiliu Tătăruși, soldier in the Romanian army, was called in for recruitments in 1916. His experience on the battle implied starvation too. Supply was brought by train, often targeted by the enemy.⁹

⁵ Ion D. Isac, „Din zilele unui învățător de țară” (București: Eminescu, 1986), 37.

⁶ Isac, Din zilele unui învățător de țară, 61.

⁷ Isac, Din zilele unui învățător de țară, 93.

⁸ Isac, Din zilele unui învățător de țară, 37.

⁹ Alexandru Vasiliu Tătăruși, „Focul cel Mare. Amintiri din Primul Război Mondial”, (Iași: Junimea, 1978), 37.

A phenomenon often to be seen in war time is the one of abandonment of the settlement by the civilians. Tătăruși related that he met some cases like that, for the joy of the entire corps of the army because an abandoned settlement meant forgotten reserves, abandoned houses to harbor, animals to sacrifice.

The joy of his corps was intense when, in a basement, they found pickle cabbage which they consumed with duck meat and corn mush¹⁰. Such food was considered to be a feast knowing that their ration consisted in bean soup and bread.¹¹ Sometimes they received biscuit and meat with cabbage.¹²

The diaries reveal the secret of survival, the packages received from home along with the letters. Those food stuff were usually shared with the others soldiers because they say that in those times, people lived closer and they shared all together as brothers.¹³ The content of those packages was never revealed in letters, but it's easy to imagine that only food stuff that wasn't likely to go bad quickly and with a high caloric power like bacon and cheese could be sent.

Mihai Dan was recruited in 1914 in Austro-Hungarian army. The policy of multinational empire was to avoid Romanian soldiers to fight against their brothers, so Dan was sent on others battle fields.¹⁴

In the first day, he received bread and bacon, but afterward, for three day, he was deprived of food. He ate vegetables. Situations alike were to be seen all over the war theatre. Sometimes, rations were served only once on week. Meanwhile, soldiers ate corn and grain from the land.

In settlements, they usually searched for food from door to door and they were willing to pay important amount of money for a slice of meat, a hunk of cheese or a loaf of bread.

An old man was impressed by Dan's situation and sold him a loaf of bread¹⁵. The time he spent there, the old man took care of him and sent him meat and bread, as cordial.¹⁶

Christmas during war hadn't had the same spirit, but soldiers tried to make those holidays special, to feel like home. Romanian winter holidays are defined by food

¹⁰ Tătăruși, Focul cel Mare. Amintiri din Primul Război Mondial, 68-69.

¹¹ Tătăruși, Focul cel Mare. Amintiri din Primul Război Mondial, 84.

¹² Tătăruși, Focul cel Mare. Amintiri din Primul Război Mondial, 94.

¹³ Tătăruși, Focul cel Mare. Amintiri din Primul Război Mondial, 69.

¹⁴ Mihai Dan, „Istoria ce am petrecut în crâncenul război”, (Baia Mare: Muzeul Sătmărean, 2008), 18.

¹⁵ Dan, Istoria ce am petrecut în crâncenul război, 21.

¹⁶ Dan, Istoria ce am petrecut în crâncenul război, 21.

abundance: pork meat, sausages, bacon and others traditional meals. In order to make a Christmas spirit, they tried to buy all those dainties they enjoyed home. The commandant succeeded to buy sausages and bacon in the first holiday of war and a small pig to sacrifice in the third. This acquisition was cooked for all the soldiers of the troop as steak.¹⁷

Soldier's life wasn't always difficult. There were times when they could buy food stuff from the villages' inhabitants: meat, bread and vegetables.

In Slavonic lands, Mihai Dan, along with his comrades, bought a hen to feed five people. It wasn't an easy task, but one of the soldiers cooked it so well that everyone was satisfied.¹⁸ Other settlements offered them a better source of food: eggs, bacon, sausages, bread and cheese, aliments to be used in dressing a complex meal.¹⁹

The good faith of the seller wasn't a constant. Sometimes they bought contaminated meat, but the desperate situation determined them to eat it to prevent starvation. The ration of a soldier was modified due to the supplies quantity; so in late 1916, the bread served for the ones that risked their lives to save their land was made from corn and even its quality was doubtful. As in concern for its quantity, 2 loaves were spared in 5 and often that was the only supply given. When their camp was near a village, along with bread, they also received cans.

In 1916, Mihai Dan fought in the Italian front. There, life wasn't that hard and that was to be seen especially in ration. The natives sold or simply gave food stuff to soldiers. Butter, bacon and wine completed their diet. Abundance was often recalled by Dan, the lack of food was, for some reasons neglected but he never forgot those times when he fed with ear of corn or grain in the land field, those times when he and his companions had to steal food in order to stay alive and bread wasn't to be seen in weeks.

Idealizing the spirit on the battle field, Cassian R. Munteanu remembers how wounded soldiers came in a hurry in the first aid camp for a bandage and returned in the tranches with a hunk of bread in their hands.²⁰

Diaries revealed not only the famine, the fights, the instability, but also the differences between soldiers and their superiors, differences made especially in ration. Vasiliu remembers that his superiors had a better life and that his life improved when he

¹⁷ Dan, *Istoria ce am petrecut în crâncenul război*, 22.

¹⁸ Dan, *Istoria ce am petrecut în crâncenul război*, 25.

¹⁹ Dan, *Istoria ce am petrecut în crâncenul război*, 40-42.

²⁰ Constantin Căzănișteanu and Dorina Rusu, „Pe aici nu se trece! Mărturii, amintiri”, (București: Albatros, 1982), 223.

was assigned to become the assistant of a captain. His ration included meat and wine for that period.²¹

Romanian literature inspired by the war tended to approve what Vasiliu affirmed. Camil Petrescu, through his character, Ștefan Ghiorghidiu reconstructed officers ration prior to war: deer meat cooked with mushrooms and a special dressing, trout with butter, fresh cheese, vegetables, boiled eggs and meat balls.²² To afford such a luxury, the officers cut the sugar ration meant to sweeten the soldiers' tea.

Hospitality characterized even the battle fields. The captain, Ghiorghidiu's superior waited for his soldiers with coffee and sweets.²³

The break out of a fight disrupted the camp's silence. A day before, the orderlies threw away an ox's meat because they were sure that they wouldn't survive and even if they hadn't died, they wouldn't be able to eat.²⁴ At the contrary, they survived and they also starved.

Superiors ration was consisted of: chicken steak, bread, currants and wine. Meanwhile, soldiers ate tea and beans.²⁵

In the evening, officers often had special dinner. There, orderlies served outlawry steak, white sauce stew, chicken meat, chocolate, jam, cheese and eggs.²⁶ A feast's menu consisted in fried chicken, sardines, peppers stuffed with rice, and meat and the event that caused it was the packages received from home. Solidarity determined them to share everything they got.²⁷

Apostol Bologa, Liviu Rebreanu's character didn't account much for his living conditions because his orderly took good care of his menu. As a superior officer, he was taken in by the officials of the villages he camped that provided for him.²⁸

As we could see, the testimonies of the soldiers spoke out about rough living conditions: supplying was made in difficult conditions, with insufficient food stuff; the calories intake weren't enough, civilians often chose to protect soldiers, but sometimes their hostility was even bigger. For the ones who fought, the war meant starvation,

²¹ Alexandru Vasiliu Tătăruși, „Focul cel Mare”, 93.

²² Camil Petrescu, „Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război”, București: Curtea Veche, 2009, 170.

²³ Petrescu, Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război, 173.

²⁴ Petrescu, Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război, 214.

²⁵ Petrescu, Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război, 235-236.

²⁶ Petrescu, Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război, 265, 279, 294.

²⁷ Petrescu, Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război, 303.

²⁸ Liviu Rebreanu, „Pădurea Spânzuraților”, (București: Litera, 2010), 198.

diseases, imminent danger and death. Their life was put in danger not only by the ammunition of the enemy, by shells and cannons, but also by the famine that debilitate them. They were the ones who got sacrificed, but looking closer one can notice that civilians suffered also the consequences of the war. We cannot compare their suffering, but we cannot ignore it either.

II. FOOD AMONG CIVILIANS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Historians hadn't much to say about civilians during war because such history seemed glory less. At a closer look, one could notice that they had an important role in the economy, keeping agriculture alive and transforming factories to produce ammunition. The military hospitals were served by civilians as well and producing food was another important task they had to complete.

The civilians' suffering could't be compare with soldiers' but for the followers of a complete history, it couldn't be neglected. At home, important transformations took place: the young men gone, cities and villages remained empty of the most important manpower and their survival depended on the women and their new role. Economy had to be transformed in order to supply the army with the needed ammunition. The food necessary rose and the power of obtaining good harvest decreased.

From the beginning, the governments involved themselves in the alimentary problem establishing maximums in food stuff prices. It was established a necessary quota of food for each habitant as well. This quota was to be used only for farms that produced food stuff. What exceeded this quota it was requested by the state in exchange for an amount of money. In Transylvania, cereals, foddery, milk, leather and animals, especially horses were requisitioned touched. Later, in 1916 and 1917, the empire decided to take beans, peas, lentils and millet.

Money depreciated, the precious metal coins were redrawn from the monetary market to create a covering fund, the prices rose continuous and touched values up to 445% beside the ones prior the war and speculation became a profitable business.²⁹

The black market developed, even if the food stuff prices doubled. Horse meat, considered unworthy to be consumed got in the daily diet to increase the protein intake. Bread lost its quality. The flour used to bake it wasn't grain madden any more. Bakers

²⁹ Eugenia Bârlea, „Perspectiva lumii rurale asupra Primului Război Mondial”, 97.

usually used flour mixture. Its price rose and, by the end of 1915 it was forbidden to sell pastries that contained over 50% of that ingredient.³⁰

In the same time, meat became a luxury aliment and it was forbidden to sell it on Wednesday and Friday. At the end of the year, the monarchy introduces rations books for flour and bread. In 1917, potatoes and vegetables were being requisitioned and fats weren't sold in some of the week's days. The prohibition didn't stop here. The Empire forbade not only the commerce of fats and meat, but also the use of it in those days.

All aliments were ration: bread, milk and vegetables, for each one of this, the ration was established. For children, the quantity of the ration was reduced to a half and the infants weren't considerate, even if breast feeding required a double ration for the mother.

Ion D. Isac remembers that another source of suffering were the soldiers. They robbed the farmyard taking animals and poultry and the larder to take bacon, eggs and even alcohol.³¹

Soldiers weren't always a fear. Sometimes they tried to help women in need in exchange for food and clothes. That kind of behaviors encouraged in others regions wasn't allowed in the Empire. The courts of law punished the civilians for sheltering foreign soldiers, especially if they were Russians. Cases like that fulfilled the activity of the court of law from Cluj.³²

In 1917, Elie Dăianu wrote about the awful situation that inhabitants of Alba had to face. The soldiers, starving, begged from door to door to find some bread, but no one could give them because this aliment couldn't be found on the market. Ladies had to travel till Teiuș in order to find some, but not everyone was lucky enough to find a seller.³³

As in every situation that went beyond the limits, to survive, civilians and soldiers had to find food stuff to deaden the hunger. One of this aliment was considered to be the fodder beet. Fodder for animals, this food stuff was adopted in the soldiers and prisoners' diet, after it was tested on civilians.³⁴ Pumpkins were other good example. They were used in feeding pigs and cows and entered in human diet as a necessity. But nothing goes that far that alfalfa. It was used in human nutrition cooked with flour and onion and it was served to soldiers.³⁵

³⁰ Bârlea, *Perspectiva lumii rurale asupra Primului Război Mondial*, 111.

³¹ Ion D. Isac, „Din zilele unui învățător de țară”, 92.

³² Elie Dăianu, „Însemnări din închisoare și exil”, vol. II, (Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut, 2003), 22.

³³ Dăianu, *Însemnări din închisoare și exil*, vol. I, 65.

³⁴ Dăianu, *Însemnări din închisoare și exil*, vol. II, 46.

³⁵ Dăianu, *Însemnări din închisoare și exil*, vol. II, 47.

Famine caused important social crisis. Pushed beyond the limits by the need to feed their babies, thousands of women protested in the streets of Cluj, in front of the city hall asking for food and menacing. This type of actions uncounted no success at all; they were only cries for help.

The life of ordinary people was very difficult during the war. For some, even the problem of survival was posed, but in Transylvanian society there were families in which war meant only a decrease of supplies. Valeriu Braniște's family³⁶ can be considered one of those. In his correspondence with his wife and mother, they deplore family's new problem: the daily diet. Maria, his mother, discussing about her daughter in law and about her grandchildren, mentioned that war became a real problem for them. Their meal had to be cooked only with flour, bacon, fat, vegetables, meat and milk.³⁷ Those were the ingredients used in ordinary conditions in every family, but in the last year of war meat had become a luxury, bacon was very expensive, fat was difficult to find on market and milk had a special treatment.

Besides that, Maria, the wife, had to take care of his husband confined at Szegedin prison. She sent him packages with cheese, bacon, a half of bread, roe, fish, onion, cucumbers, meat (chicken, geese, cow or pork), salame, eggs, cookies, sponge cake, biscuits, coffee, tea or cappuccino and fresh fruits.³⁸

Dăianu family³⁹ is also one of those in which supplies decreased during war, but survival wasn't a problem, even if requisitions limited the resources, the commerce was prohibited and the harvest was meagerly, Elie's daughters afforded to send packages with appetizers, boiled eggs, sausages, cakes and apples from Reteag, cheese from Bistrița, wine from Micești and coffee from Cuba.⁴⁰ On winter holidays, the packages were made only from products obtained from their pork, an animal saved by his silence from the Bavarians.⁴¹ On Eastern, the sacrificed lamb was transformed into steak, soup and stewed

³⁶ Valeriu Braniște (n. January, 10th 1869, Cincul Mare, Brașov county - d. January 1st 1928, Lugoj, Timiș county), was a journalist, politician and a member of Romanian Academy.

³⁷ DJAN Cluj, Fond personal Valeriu Braniște, dos. 2, f. 36.

³⁸ Valeriu Braniște, „Scrisori din închisoare”, Reșița: Banatica, 1996, 52.

³⁹ Elie (Ilie) Dăianu (1868-1956) was a priest and a militant for the national cause. He worked for journals like: *Familia*, *Tribuna*, *Dreptatea*, *Răvașul*, *Asociațiunea*, *Transilvania*, *Albina*, *Convorbiri literare*, *Unirea*. In 1917 he was imprisoned under the accusation of illegal possession of weapons and collaboration with the enemy and was hold in the prison of Cluj for a year.

⁴⁰ Elie Dăianu, „Însemnări din închisoare și exil”, vol. I, 50.

⁴¹ Dăianu, *Însemnări din închisoare și exil*, vol. II, 48.

giblets. The lucky goose, that remained in the farmyard after the soldiers' robberies were also transformed into special dishes for the prisoner.

CONCLUSION

Looking back to this important event in the XX century's history, historiography saw, for a long period of time only bravery, glory and heroes. In this idyllic picture, the war was just a way to obtain the accomplishment of an ideal, the unifying of Romanians regions. What war really meant for the people who lived in those times can't be revealed by the historical documentation. That can be realized only if the historian passes beyond barriers imposed by positive history and searches data in areas unexploited yet. Memories, literature and diaries are subjective sources, but they reveal the image printed in the subconscious mind of the authors. Of course, the laws considering prohibitions, ration, taxes, found raisings and requisitions are a valuable source, but that category of sources can reveal only dry data and only in conjunction with subjective data could show us what war really meant.

For a soldier, war meant danger, death, bravery and disease, lack of hygiene, wounds, alienation and starvation. For civilians, it meant fear, breakup of the beloved, insecurity, instability, taxes, gaps and famine.

As we could see, the famine was just a problem among others, but we considered to be the most important because the lack of supply and the starvation put in danger any organism, it weakened it and finally, it drew it to death.

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