

Kosher During the War: Food Provisions for the Jewish Population of Lower Austria from 1914 to 1918

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Jewish dietary laws are an encompassing concept for ritual purity during food consumption. The majority of the biblically stipulated dietary regulations relate to meat, fish, dairy products, and wine. The members of the sixteen Israelitische Kultusgemeinden (Jewish community organizations, IKGs) of Lower Austria – then still including the capital city of Vienna and its IKG – were bound to these regulations if they were religious.

The kosher supply structures of the IKG, which had been developed over the preceding decades, were hit by the shock of the outbreak of war in 1914. As early as September, hundreds of thousands of Jews, including many strictly religious people, fled from Galicia and Bukovina in the face of the advancing Russian armies to Bohemia, Moravia, and Lower Austria. In the crownlands, countless thousands were put up in Vienna and thousands more in the rural environs. These refugees, and later the Jewish soldiers stationed in or being provided for in the local military hospitals, as well as prisoners of war, raised the demand for kosher food enormously.

However, in the Austrian half of the Dual Monarchy grain was already becoming scarce and expensive in the autumn of 1914, with shortages of meat occurring in 1915. Moreover, Hungary then introduced export restrictions for agrarian products on the internal border between the two halves of the monarchy. The supply of foodstuffs, whether kosher or not, deteriorated steadily. By 1916, supplies had been exhausted and hunger was prevailing. War bread from replacement grains could only just be declared kosher; “war sausage” and products from horse meat, however, could not. The Hungarian gendarmerie maintained a tight control over the border between the two halves of the monarchy in order to inhibit the smuggling of foodstuffs. Shortages in supplies, the black market, and extortionate prices were in the last two years of the war exploited propagandistically by antisemites, especially following the easing of censorship in 1917. Supposedly, the state supply “centers” responsible for the rationing of meat, fat, metal, war coffee, wool, and so forth were staffed by a large number of Jews. This new stereotype of the “Jewish war profiteer” further fueled the antisemitic rabble-rousing after the end of the war.

This project examines a hitherto understudied dimension of food supplies in times of crisis through the case study of the Jewish population of Lower Austria and the war refugees and soldiers of World War I: the supply of nourishment that was symbolically charged and significant for religion and identity.