

Food and Nutrition (Portugal)

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During the Great War consumers emerged as a new demanding group within European society. Their demands for fairer prices almost always emerged in connection with the need for broader reform of both the state and the economy. This article analyzes the main measures that Portugal implemented during World War I in the field of nutrition, focusing on the extent and limits of the “politicization” of consumption and noting the impact of the disruptions brought about by the lack of foodstuffs.

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Introduction

In addition to the military and financial dilemmas of the day, the [Portuguese political power](#) devoted great attention to solving the problem caused by the shortage of [essential supplies](#) and [food](#) in World War I. In fact, the most significant transformations in the relationship between the state and society took place in this domain in a deep and long-lasting manner.^[1]

The analysis of the relation between war and food has been approached by [Portuguese historiography](#) from two perspectives: on the one hand through the study of [public health](#)^[2] and on the other through the analysis of agricultural policies, including Portuguese agriculture's endemic failure to meet the needs of domestic consumption.^[3] The studies dedicated to analyzing the Portuguese home front during 1914-1918 approach the food issue in a concise manner, doing so almost always from the perspective of state interventionism and within the wider context of scarcity. It is worth underlining that in the broader domain of Portuguese food policies history,^[4] the 20th century has only been superficially studied.^[5]

In 1915 [José Azevedo da Silva \(1894-1964\)](#) defended a pioneering final thesis at the University of Porto's Faculty of Medicine, where he systematically advanced contributions to the study of Portuguese nourishment history. However, and despite the work being carried out in wartime, Azevedo da Silva chose to analyze the food issue exclusively from a medical point of view. He did not reflect on the war's potential impact on changing consumption habits or the importance of food in developing a national defense strategy.^[6]

Three years later, [Bento de Sousa Carqueja \(1860-1935\)](#) published a short article in *Boletim da Associação Central da Agricultura Portuguesa* (Bulletin of the Central Agriculture Association), titled “*A alimentação em Portugal*” (Food in Portugal),^[7]

based on a direct survey carried out all over the country. In this study Carqueja studied the average amount of individual rations in different regions of the country and also for different families. He eventually concluded that Portuguese nourishment was insufficient, demonstrating that the greatest shortages were in the northeast region, which consisted of the districts Bragança and Vila Real.^[8]

Consumption, Restrictions and Shortages

Feeding the population – an essential component of a nation’s wellbeing and the source of constant tension – proved to be an indispensable foundation for any attempt at the definition of a national defense policy.

Countries	Values in contos in 1913	Percentage over the total in 1913	Percentage over the total in 1909
Great Britain	23,489	26.40%	26.94%
Germany	15,840	17.80%	17.80%
United States	9,892	11.12%	10.08%
France	7,594	8.53%	8.90%
Spain	3,843	4.52%	6.58%
Colonies	2,850	3.20%	3.29%
Brazil	1,651	1.86%	2.02%

Table 1: Portugal Imports for Consumption (1913)^[9]

The municipalities implemented the main measures regulating the distribution of essential supplies in [Portugal](#). After the second half of the 19th century, the Portuguese state rarely addressed issues related to food shortage. Instead, it relied on local authorities and the [Catholic Church](#), in particular its network of charities, to search for effective solutions to the problem. One of the best ways to understand the struggle to resolve scarcity during the 1914-1918 period is to identify and analyze the challenges and difficulties faced by [urban communities](#).

Over the course of several meetings, Lisbon’s Executive Board discussed the consequences of the outbreak of war in Europe. The energy that the city devoted to adopting measures to mitigate the effects of the looming crisis was evident in the meeting held on 4 August 1914, the precise date that [Great Britain](#) declared war on [Germany](#).^[10] On 18 August 1914 the Portuguese government approved a 1 million dollar credit for the Ministry of Economy to pay for costs resulting from the economic crisis.^[11] On the same day, the economic minister established the Commission of Supplies and ordered a study on the necessary measures to ensure food supplies in the mainland territory and in the colonies.^[12]

The richest, most abundant and varied diet was found in the city of Lisbon. Meat – beef, veal, lamb, and pork – and fish – cod, hake, shark, mackerel, sea bass, halibut, and swordfish – were the basis of the diet among the bourgeoisie and aristocracy. The working classes’ diet was less diversified and much simpler. Farm workers’ diet was based essentially on bread, vegetables, and wine. The consumption of meat and fish, except in coastal regions, was virtually non-existent, while fruit was present at almost every meal throughout the year, just as it was among the bourgeoisie and aristocracy. The urban workers had access to more variety. The consumption of meat, fish, rice, pasta and [coffee](#) was common, although their diet provided far less than the 3,400 calories considered to be the minimal daily subsistence threshold. Bread was one of the main components of this diet, as it best fitted their scarce budget; its absence was almost always synonymous with hunger.

One of the main problems that emerged shortly after the beginning of hostilities was the difficulty experienced by the vast majority of European countries in purchasing cereals (in particular wheat) to produce bread, and animal products, such as meat. Despite the enactment of the protectionist laws of 1889 and 1899, domestic wheat production was unable to meet internal market demand. Both laws were unable to develop and enhance national cereal production. They were never accompanied by complementary measures capable of developing and increasing workers’ technical capacity, which would have enabled them to use modern means to increase the soil’s productive capacity.

Apart from bread and cereals, sugar, potatoes and meat were the first foodstuffs to run low in Lisbon. This was due not only to a shortage in [transportation](#) means, but also to the endemic deficiencies that characterized the Portuguese production base. Agriculture had not intensified, the commercial fleet was clearly insufficient to meet the country's needs, and industry remained unable to supply both the mainland and the colonies.

The lack of meat in the Portuguese capital, in particular, was an old problem. It worsened considerably, especially from early 1915 on, when [submarine warfare](#) made access to traditional provider markets – Azores and Argentina – more difficult. In addition to this problem, the price of pigs and sheep increased due not only to the increase in consumption resulting from the need to supply food to military expeditions in [Angola and Mozambique](#), but also as a result of the government's authorization to export cattle to Gibraltar.^[13] As a result the price of fish, an important foodstuff in the lower classes' diet, rose considerably. This generalized the feeling that the war had contributed to aggravate economic and social inequalities, in the absence of a shared sacrifice among all Lisbon inhabitants.

Products	June 1914	December 1914
(Kilo)	(Escudos cents)	(Escudos cents)
Third-tier sugar	\$24	\$27
Third-tier rice	\$11	\$13
Dry cod	\$14	\$17
Wheat	\$14	\$18
Bacon	\$38	\$40
Sausages	\$68	\$72

Table 2: Retail Food Prices in Lisbon (Comparison between June and December 1914)^[14]

The war also showed that the country's [economic reorganization](#) would in any event have to include the adoption of a collaborative development strategy in which the state and municipalities strengthened their relationships and articulated synergies and actions, while defining and clarifying the extent of their respective domains of action.

The Regulation of Prices

On 10 August 1914, a decree establishing penalties for traders who pushed up the prices of necessity goods was promulgated. The government sought to contain speculation in an attempt to safeguard the interests of the most disadvantaged layers of the population. Near the city of Porto, shortly after Britain's declaration of war on Germany, many merchants raised the prices of products they had stored, "no longer supplying retail houses, their clients, for the prices in force..."^[15] It is necessary, therefore, to look at the black market and to measure its relative importance as an exogenous element of pressure in aggravating living conditions. One should therefore consider the role of the above-mentioned suppliers of essential foodstuffs, particularly those close to the border, who, on grounds of illegal food export to [Spain](#), did not hesitate to illegally increase prices, forcing the small dealers from the capital into non-compliance with the established table.

Throughout the autumn of 1914 the Ministry of the Interior received a growing number of letters from small traders denouncing farmers' greed, warning the government against the impossibility of maintaining pre-war prices and of a possible shortage of products in the Lisbon market. In fact, the price control policy, especially for the necessity goods, turned out to be quite liberal, creating space for non-compliance with price tables and, consequently, for speculation.

According to the data published in the *Boletim da Associação Central da Agricultura Portuguesa*, the rise in the price of meat between 1914 and 1918, expressed as a percentage, was around 200 percent.^[16] As a result, growing restlessness and discontent became widespread among the Portuguese population.

	Unit	Prices (Reis)	
		July 1914	January 1918
Mutton	Kilo	280	900

Pork	Kilo	440	1,200
Beef (for baking)	Kilo	320	800
Veal	Kilo	360	1,200

Table 3: Increase in the Price of Meat (1914-1918)^[17]

The need to update prices was reinforced, which justified the creation of a Regulatory Committee on Food Prices (*Comissão Reguladora dos Preços dos Géneros Alimentícios*, or CRPGA) at the municipal level, established under the directorate general of agriculture, whom the minister of development entrusted with the “(...) development of a table of prices, for sale of first necessity foodstuffs to the public, in the parishes and settlements on the territory of each municipality(...)” and “(...) other goods which might require similar action, as deemed appropriate.”^[18] The tables were to be published and reviewed on a monthly basis, with the civil government of each district responsible for approving them. As for the pricing, the CRPGA’s guidelines were supposed to take into account the following considerations:

1. The cost of the goods in the various sources where they were acquired (producers, farmers, manufacturers or importers);
2. The cost of transportation and custom clearance;
3. The fair profit of retailers.^[19]

The government eventually multiplied the mechanisms and instruments of control, creating a Supplies Committee at the seat of each municipality, from which it commissioned the preparation of tables with maximum sale prices for the goods deemed necessary for public consumption in the different parishes.

Throughout the country there were numerous [protests](#) against the dramatic crisis and hunger during the war, but above all against the illegitimate actions of those who, on a daily basis and despite all regulations and prohibitions, sent abroad tons of food that was needed for the daily sustenance of the poorer classes at home. This was one of the reasons why the strengthening of the role and intervention of both the state and the municipalities in the economic circuit was proposed as alternative. This would structure and define a policy of direct purchase of food necessary for feeding the public. Its full implementation would be able to stop, as much as possible, food hoarding and price growth due to speculation.

On 31 August 1915, through Law No. 371,^[20] the sale of domestic wheat to any other entity than the Military Supplies was prohibited. According to the law, all the wheat in transit in the country, through any route and whose destination was not the Military Supplies, was to be considered smuggled goods and therefore confiscated. However, it is no surprise that enforcement of the bill was quite limited. One of the most important reasons for that was the milling industry’s reaction: it quite confidently threatened to close down the main factories of Lisbon if it were to be deprived of access to the free market.^[21] The situation was regularized in October 1915, when Military Supplies lost the monopoly on the purchase of wheat and henceforth dedicated itself only to supplying the military.^[22] It is important to remember that in Portugal, centralized rationing measures were only introduced in relation to the main foodstuffs during September 1918, and they had nearly no practical effects.^[23]

Consumption

The first protests regarding food shortages surfaced in Porto on 18 September 1914. They protested the civil governor’s prohibition of a demonstration against speculation and hunger, and culminated in attacks on several food establishments.^[24] The government was confronted with a new phenomenon. It did not know how to react to the movement’s spontaneity or how to attack its unknown leadership. But they quickly realized that it was necessary to remedy things before they got out of hand, which could over time compromise the Republic itself.^[25] That was the aim of the Porto City Hall when it approved a motion, drafted by the chairman of the Executive Committee of Supplies, and sent to the head of government, [Bernardino Luís Machado Guimarães \(1851-1944\)](#), where they asked for an end to the speculation and a resolution of the food crisis that threatened the district. The government provoked and extended its intervention capacity in the social sector, consolidating initiatives, including not only the “political bread” (bread whose price was subsidized by the government) but also the large credit intended to the maintain soup kitchens.

The combined effects of unemployment, food shortages and high prices eventually gained momentum, inevitably leading to significant public disorder in several districts of the country, even before Germany's declaration of war on Portugal in March 1916.^[26] In January 1916, the Central Council of the National Workers' Union (UON) for the first time proposed the idea of organizing a general strike against the scarce living conditions.^[27]

In the months of April, May and June 1917, working conferences were held in the cities of Lisbon and Porto.^[28] They brought together 176 unions, four industry federations, two confederations of unions, several workers' newspapers and a number of cooperatives. Three of these were discussed: workers' organization, scarcity, and workers' organization in relation to the conditions of peace.^[29]

In the discussion on the high cost of living – the most widely discussed topic – participants criticized the prevailing economic regime and reaffirmed the uselessness of the government's attempts to solve the supplies' crisis, considering it a clear sign of the government's inability and impotence.^[30] In this context, state-employed construction workers demanded higher salaries from the minister of economy and the government expressed fear that a strike was imminent if this demand was not met.^[31]

On 23 February 1917, the Sacred Union eventually determined the production, for the city of Lisbon, of a single type of bread with wheat and corn flour.^[32] In fact, the difficulty in acquiring wheat, at a time when the cereal deficit amounted to 112 million kilograms, made it impossible to continue to produce bread exclusively of this cereal. One should also notice the alarm that the publication of this decree brought to the people in northern Portugal, fearful that their counties might be hit by famine. The situation was serious and malaise became imminent; on 13 May 1917 some bakeries in Lisbon closed down and the people, suspecting that they might be hoarding bread, sacked them. In the absence of bread, people used everything that could replace it; the price of potatoes went up from six cents a kilo to twelve and fourteen cents, strengthening the momentum of the workers' protests and the feeling of discontent and revolt.

Inevitably, the labor minister, trying to alleviate the shortage of bread in the capital, promulgated Decree No. 3,136. The decree legalized the entry of any type of bread into Lisbon, allowing, albeit with little success, inhabitants to receive bread from family members living in the [countryside](#).^[33] In addition, all grocery stores, warehouses and bakeries were summoned to surrender all the corn, wheat and flour that they possessed. The measures taken at successive meetings of the Council of Ministers failed to solve the difficulties affecting the city and were unable to keep government forces from being viewed as the main culprits for the wave of social unrest that raged in the capital.

A few days later, on 19 May 1917, the minister of the interior forbade a rally of the Construction Federation scheduled to be held at Eduardo VII Park. On that same morning the first attacks against bakeries were carried out, and after that, against grocery stores, food stores, taverns, restaurants, clothing stores, shoe stores and hat stores. In an unprecedented movement known as the "potato revolt", 186 bakeries were sacked from 13 to 20 May 1917. On 20 May 1917, Bernardino Machado declared a state of emergency and handed over the command of Lisbon to the military.^[34] The combined effects of unemployment, food shortages and high prices gained a momentum of their own, inevitably producing significant disruptions of public order in several districts of the country that lasted until the end of the war.

Conclusion

The Great War must not only be seen as a mere interruption of daily life. The war significantly influenced [daily life](#), causing ruptures and breaks both in food production as well as, inevitably, in distribution and consumption. This is indeed a story in which, as we have noted, two distinct but complementary realities intersected and combined: national and international networks of transport and distribution; and individual strategies of resistance.

The food revolution and change in consumption patterns that had begun in a large number of European cities in the second half of the 19th century made them more dependent on the regular import of a wide variety of food products. This eventually turned the wartime food shortage into a wide-reaching experience, inseparable from the [collective memory](#) of the European continent during the war years, to which Portugal was no exception.

Notes

1. ↑ Cf. Davis, Belinda: *Home Fires Burning. Food, Politics and Everyday Life in World War I* Berlin, Chapel Hill 2000, p. 20.
2. ↑ Cf. Garnel, Maria Rita Lino (ed.): *Corpo. Estado, medicina e sociedade no tempo da I República* [Body, State, Medicine and Society in the 1st Republic], Lisbon 2010.
3. ↑ Cf. Pires, Ana Paula: *Portugal e a I Guerra Mundial. A República e a Economia de Guerra* [Portugal and the First World War. The Republic and the war economy], Casal de Cambra 2011.
4. ↑ de Oliveira Marques, A. H.: *Aspectos da vida quotidiana* [Aspects of daily life] in: de Oliveira Marques, A. H. (ed.): *Portugal da Monarquia para a República* [Portugal from the monarchy to the Republic], volume XI, Lisbon 1991, pp. 590-617.
5. ↑ Amorim, Roby: *Da Mão à Boca. Para uma história da alimentação em Portugal* [From hand to mouth towards a history of food in Portugal], Lisbon 1987; Saramago, Alfredo: *Para uma História da alimentação de Lisboa e seu termo* [Towards a History of of Food in Lisbon], Lisbon 2004.
6. ↑ Azevedo da Silva, José: *Questões alimentares. Subsídios para o estudo da alimentação portuguesa* [Food issues. Subsidies to the study of Portuguese food], Porto 1915, p. 27.
7. ↑ Cf. Carqueja, Bento: *A alimentação em Portugal* [Food in Portugal] in: *Boletim da Associação Central da Agricultura Portuguesa* Bulletin of the Central Agriculture Association 20/20 (1918), pp. 321-324.
8. ↑ *Ibid.*, p. 322.
9. ↑ Domingos de Meneses, José: *O Comércio de Portugal com a Alemanha* [Portugal's trade with Germany] in: *O Economista Portuguez. Revista Financeira, Económica, Social e Colonial* [The Portuguese Economist. Financial, social, colonial and economic magazine], 12/128 (24 September 1921), p. 545.
10. ↑ *Actas da Câmara Municipal de Lisboa* [Proceedings of the municipality of Lisbon], 4 August 1914, pp. 313f.
11. ↑ Cf. Decree no. 768, in: *Diário do Governo* [Government Gazette], I series, no. 145, 18 August 1914.
12. ↑ Decree no. 767, in: *Suplemento ao Diário do Governo* [Supplement to the Government Gazette], I series, no. 145, 18 August 1914.
13. ↑ *A Falta de carne* [The lack of meat], in: *O Jornal do Comércio e das Colónias* [Newspaper of Colonies and Trade] 18,308 (11 February 1915), p. 1.
14. ↑ NAUK, FO 368/1383: *Portugal. Report on the Commerce and Finance of Portugal*, London, Foreign Office and Board of Trade, 1915, p. 15.
15. ↑ DGARQ-TT, Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Public and Civil Administration, 1st Repartição/1st Section (public safety), Bundle 53, Official note of 18 August 1914 sent by the Civil Governor of Vila Real to the Minister of Interior.
16. ↑ *Boletim da Associação Central da Agricultura Portuguesa* Bulletin of the Central Agriculture Association 21/7 (July 1919), p. 209.
17. ↑ *Ibid.*
18. ↑ *Ibid.*
19. ↑ *Ibid.*
20. ↑ Law no. 371, in: *Diário do Governo* [Government Gazette] I series, no. 173, 31 August 1915.
21. ↑ *A Questão das farinhas* [The matter of flower], in: *O Jornal do Comércio e das Colónias* [Newspaper of Colonies and Trade] (4 September 1915), p. 1.
22. ↑ Decree no. 1969, in: *Diário do Governo* [Government Gazette] I series, no. 211, 18 October 1915.
23. ↑ *Restrições do consumo de géneros alimentícios* [Food consumption restrictions], in: *Boletim da Previdência Social* [Welfare Bulletin] 2/6 (May to September 1918), pp. 259f.
24. ↑ DGARQ-TT, Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Public and Civil Administration, 1st Repartição/1st Section (public safety), Bundle 55, Official note of 19 September 1914 sent by the Civil Governor of Porto to the head of government and the Minister of Interior.
25. ↑ Cf. NAUK/FO 368/1063, Memorandum of 27 September 1914, sent by Lancelot Carnegie to Edward Grey, p. 1.
26. ↑ NAUK/FO 368/1383, confidential memo on commerce and finances of Portugal, 22 March 1915, sent by Lancelot Carnegie to Edward Grey.
27. ↑ *Diário da Câmara dos Deputados* [Diary of the House of Representatives], Session 32, 2 February 1916, p. 8f.
28. ↑ In Lisbon the workers' conference took place at *Teatro Estrela* on 29 April and 1 May 1917, and in Porto it was held at *Salão Apolo Terrasse* on 6-7 June 1917.

29. ↑ Oliveira, César: O Movimento sindical português [Portuguese Union Movement], p. 29.
30. ↑ Oliveira, César: Os limites e a ambiguidade [The boundaries of ambiguity], p. 702.
31. ↑ Sessão de 2 de Maio de 1917 [Session of the 2nd of May 1917] in: de Oliveira Marques, A. H.: O Terceiro Governo Afonso Costa. [The Third Government of Afonso Costa] 1917, Lisbon 1977, p. 54.
32. ↑ Cf. Diário do Governo [Government Gazette] I series, no. 28, 23 February 1917.
33. ↑ Pires, Ana Paula: A Indústria de Moagem de Cereais. Sua organização e reflexos políticos do seu desenvolvimento durante a I República (1899-1929), [Grain milling industry. Their organization and reflections of its development during the First Republic (1899-1929)] Dissertação de Mestrado em História dos Séculos XIX e XX, Secção do Século XX, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Masters thesis in history of the 19th and 20th centuries, 20th century section, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Lisboa, Sept. 2004 (private copies). Lisbon, September 2004 (private copy), p. 94.
34. ↑ Diário do Governo [Government Gazette] I series, no. 80, 20 May 1917; A. H. M., 1/35/box 1281, announcement of 20 May 1917.

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