

DANGEROUS LIAISONS. RUSSIAN PRISONERS OF WAR AND COUNTRY WOMEN IN WORLD
WAR I

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Introduction

The First World War is one of the central subjects of European historical writing. Relevant research on this cataclysm has adopted novel thematization, approaches, and attitudes in the past decades. Today it is impossible to eschew an investigation of the culture of war and its impacts transforming mentalities, lifestyles as well as everyday human existence. Similarly, taking stock of the spaces of battle, the considerable overlap and various connections between frontlines and hinterland is not to be ignored. Research on POWs can be justifiably classified as part of the latter domain. It has traditionally focused on the welfare and supervision of POWs, as regulated by internationally accepted as well country-specific legal measures, on major POW camps, and occasionally on forced labor by POWs.¹ This trend has badly overshadowed investigations into the relations between POWs and civilian populations, the observation and acceptance of alien status and cultural differences as well as the integration of POWs into local communities. From the point of view of contemporaries (and historians), contacts between women and Russian POWs have constituted an especially sensitive issue in this network of relations. The objective of this paper is to examine this issue. The available research material includes scant written records of government regulation, much more detailed news stories, and public-opinion-shifting journalistic accounts. This seems to be adequate to present an overview of how the issue was perceived from the angle of power politics and how it was integrated into a comprehensive campaign of wartime propaganda. Furthermore, the sources are thought

to aptly reflect various moral attitudes and representations and accurately illustrate the juxtaposition of “perpetrator or victim” points of view.

Banning Contacts and Journalistic Representations

According to a report issued by the Ministry of Defense on January 1, 1918, 442,000 POWs were involved with forced-labor projects in Hungary, 292,000 of them toiling in agriculture. The employment conditions of the latter were regulated by statutes.² Originally, the number of POWs attached to farms was set at a minimum of 200 people. Later, however, farmers were allowed to apply for smaller laborer contingents of 10 to 30. The reason was clearly communicated by the Imperial and Royal POW Command in summer 1915: The military wanted to compensate “smallholders” for the loss of drafted breadwinners and other members of the labor force. Therefore, the Supreme Command even picked up the bill of provisioning POWs.³ This, however, also brought an end to centralized distribution and supervision, although the government did not renounce its right to control its POWs’ labor and lifestyle or their contacts with the civilian population.⁴

After “various parties” had lodged complaints, the Minister of Interior decreed in December 1915

² Broken down by nationality, POWs captured by the Monarchy were about 69% Russian, 20% Italian, 8% Serbian, and 3% Romanian. Blasszauer 2003: 73–100; Moritz–Leidinger 2005: 329.

³ A daily sum of one *korona* per capita, but it was to be abolished by the end of the year.

⁴ National Archives of Hungary (MNL OL) K 184. 1335. cs. 31. 99009/1915; 1336. cs. 31. 97523/1915; *Magyarországi Rendeletek Tára* [Collection of Hungarian Ordinances]. Budapest, 1915. 1206–1207; Bartha 1916.

¹ Balla 2014: 151–176; Blasszauer 2003: 73–100.

that liquor was not to be issued to POWs. This was followed by further sanctions. The practice of inviting them to communal parties or similar events held at private houses was banned. It was especially important to segregate them after their shifts so that they could not leave their quarters at night. Their employers were not to initiate any “intimate encounters” with them. Contacts between POWs and civilians were “not to trespass moral laws, the purity of the family life of warriors fighting to defend their homes was to remain intact, and all available means of law-enforcement were to be employed against deviant family members” to hold them accountable.⁵

Work-related relations notwithstanding, the government and the top brass of the military wanted to segregate POWs. Any personal contact or friendly exchange that might have violated the hinterland’s integrity, weakened the mobilization power of the image of the enemy, or diminished the troops’ morale was to be banned. However, in dozens of villages and households employing small numbers of POWs, the ban could not be enforced. Evidence of this can be found in the various reports of county and district authorities. In the Kisjenő estate of Grand Duke Joseph, for instance, POWs were free to visit the village on Sundays and the guard looked the other way when people were treating them with liquor. Much to the indignation of Sopron County’s Agricultural Inspector, maids at an agribusiness in Rábapordány were pooling their rations of *pálinka* (brandy) to entertain Russian POWs on Sundays and public holidays. “They get them drunk so they can get laid with less effort.”⁶

The issue attracted considerable press coverage. Journalist tended to generalize from a single example. Not only did they stigmatize women in a moral sense, but also accused them of being unpatriotic and called for tough punishment. The weekly newspaper *Szarvas és vidéke* reported that casting off all moral decency, “female farmworkers repeatedly scandalized honorable people with their unpatriotic and disgraceful behavior. Not only did these debauched sluts shamelessly do their licentious business with the Russki POWs forced upon us on various farms, they even had the nerve to brag about it.” The

article goes on to cite an incident to act as a cautionary tale. A farmhand from the Szarvas region had been fighting on the Eastern Front from the outbreak of war and was killed in action. In the meantime, his wife “was happy to offer herself” to the four POWs employed on the farm. The smallholder caught them red-handed. “Two Russians inside, two outside, the she-monster in the middle... Is the gallows strict enough punishment for a slag like this?”⁷ Another article of the same paper, written with prophetic fervor, links female depravity and hypocrisy to general moral decline and the lack of inspiring ideals, evoking the heroic past as a counterpoint. During the 1848 War of Independence, fine ladies were happy to offer their jewelry, or serve by making charpies for the wounded and mourned for fallen warriors. Today, however, mourning and anguish are but mere hypocrisy. “Our female laborers are dressed in black because their spouses are serving in combat but the widow’s weeds don’t stop some from getting involved in debauchery with Russki POWs or club-footed, desecrating draft dodgers. *O tempora! O mores!* Great and hard times have made us so minuscule. ‘This because our hearts and souls are empty and the most sacred ideals are getting extinct.’”⁸ To illustrate the extent of moral “decay” and sinfulness, authors had often criminalized certain women even before they were proven guilty. A female laborer from the village of Kondoros “had thrown herself upon” a Russki and got pregnant when he received news that her combat-soldier husband serving on the Serbian front was about to be sent home on leave. “That was all the woman needed. She hastily packed a hamper and sent it to her husband. No sooner had the men eaten from it than four of them were taken ill and died in excruciating agony... Rumor has it, the traitor’s going to be sent to the gallows soon. This is what anyone who fraternizes with the enemy deserves.”⁹

⁵ *Magyarországi Rendeletek Tára*. Budapest, 1915. 2181–2182; *Magyarországi Rendeletek Tára*. Budapest, 1916. 369–370; 413–416.

⁶ MNL OL K 184. 1336. cs. 31. 97523/1915; 1937. cs. 62g 55985/1918.

⁷ The author mentions a German example of “a woman gotten laid by a POW” who was sentenced to one and a half years in prison. (In Austria the same misdemeanor got a person up to 14 days of incarceration and/or a maximum of 200-korona fine.) *Fallen Hero’s Widow Leads Loose Life with Russki POWs. What’s Happening on the Farm? Szarvas és vidéke*, July 30, 1916 2; Walleczek-Fritz 2017: 280.

⁸ “*Szarvas Olveyz Parteez.*” [Translator’s note: The original title of the piece is a quote from a person who spoke broken Hungarian.] *Szarvas és vidéke*, July 2, 1916 1.

⁹ *Kondoros Slag vs. Husband. Szarvas és vidéke*, March 12, 1916 1.

A reporter of the weekly *Szatmár és vidéke* wrote about a tragic “malignant tumor in society.” His approach, however, was more sympathetic to the perpetrators and he even tried to do some investigative reporting. During his travels, he was repeatedly told that wherever POWs were employed “womenfolk invariably started showing unmistakable symptoms. Outrageous as they might sound at first, if one gives it another thought with a cooler head, one will come to the conclusion that these symptoms are actually instinctive behaviors. There are places in the world where such symptoms have shown tangible results. They are beyond the bounds of any civil law and they do exist, therefore it is our duty to tackle them.”¹⁰

Other times, the theme of seducing women and taboo liaisons appears as anecdotal evidence in stories about normal life in the military. Such articles tend to be more moderate in tone and express some sympathy for their protagonists. A country woman from Szatmár County “had frivolous pleasures” with a Russian POW employed in the neighboring village whom she wanted to marry. The Town Court, however, warned her that this was against decency. The rebuke prompted the woman to state that she had long been a widow by the name of Mária Bartalovics. But the ensuing police investigation revealed that her real name was Júlia Dekics and her husband was serving at the front.¹¹ The newspaper *Békés* highlighted the dangers of legitimate relationships morphing into “taking liberties.” The POW employed by a Mrs. János(né) Farkas from the town of Szarvas had “begun to assume the position of the master’s second-in-command and taken to issuing orders to the woman. When she started to talk back, though, he assaulted her and gave her a vicious thrashing with a pitch-fork handle, in true Magyar style.”¹²

Szatmár és vidéke published a short-story-like account titled *Grass-Widow Village Damsels* which, for a measure of authenticity, quoted from one of the protagonists. This way readers were able to identify with her and “get insights into” her spiritual/emotional motivations. “This happened at some district seat. A fine strapping lass, headscarf drawn to nearly cover her eyes, shyly dropped into

the office of a physician who had visited the village several times. She alternately flushed and blanched then took a long while twisting her own words: ‘You see, Doctor, my husband was drafted and gotten captured by the Russians, poor thing. My old Mam, she can’t work no more, I’m all by myself on the farm. Harvest time was setting in, I needed farmhands. The Honorable Notary suggested I took a Russki POW. I accepted the offer. What do you think I should’ve done, I needed to do it, you see? Ivan was handsome, a real nice kid. Reliable and hardworking, too. We looked after him well so he had enough strength to labor nice and good. He was so deeply attached to us. He had even learned some Hungarian. We took so good care of him, ‘cause you see, we’d also be grateful if our lads were treated nice and fair yonder Siberia. Little by little me and the Russki’ve gotten close and friendly so I’ve fallen ill, you understand? If my man had an inkling of what’s going on, I’d surely die on the spot. So Doctor, I came to visit you, Sir, to beg for your help.’”¹³

Occasionally, there were severe conflicts, individual or family tragedies behind brief news accounts. Mari Marjai, from the village of Gyoma, “had fallen in love with a Russian POW and the affair bore fruit. The same old story.” The girl smothered the baby, someone squealed on her to the gendarmes and Mari hanged herself of shame.¹⁴ At the village of Bánkeresztúr, a drafted farmer’s son beat to death a Russian POW who had been her mother’s “beau,” in their backyard. Antal Kiss, a recently-married farmer from the village of Öcsöd, got news from home that his wife had “cheated on him” with a Russian POW. The man became melancholic and deserted his unit. He got home at night and the wife opened the door, pistol in hand. Kiss shot and killed her on the spot with his service revolver. The POW fled, while Kiss was found not guilty at a court martial on the basis of justifiable self-defense.¹⁵ A journalist writing for *Szarvas és vidéke* also reported on a family drama and the husband’s

¹⁰ *About the Morals of War. Szatmár és vidéke*, February 29, 1916 1–2.

¹¹ *Married Woman to Tie the Knot with Russki. Szatmár és vidéke*, June 26, 1917 3.

¹² *Russian POW Beats Up Mistress of House. Békés*, January 16, 1916 6.

¹³ The story concluded by another thirty or so women of the village having seen the doctor, who noted all the names down and gave the list to the Chief Constable. *Grass-Widow Village Damsels. Szatmár és vidéke*, June 27, 1916 3.

¹⁴ A similar tragic incident is reported in *Mohácsi Hírlap. Procured Abortion*. June 10, 1917 4. Cited by Blasszauer 2003.

¹⁵ *Mother Kills Then Commits Suicide. Szarvas és vidéke*, December 9, 1917 2; *Daddy’s Lover Murdered. Népszava*, September 9, 1917 8; *Wife’s Murderer Acquitted. Békés*, December 2, 1917 3.

revenge. His piece was full of generalizations and the reporter did not bother to hide his opinion on who he had held accountable and whose sins should be forgiven. A farmer who employed a Russian POW became suspicious, hid near the house and at an opportune moment caught his missus red-handed. He flew into a violent rage. “He took a knife and stabbed the Russki all over. Then he gave the woman such a trouncing that she couldn’t even move. This is how some of our big-mouthed rapacious women behave. They don’t think twice about throwing their honor at the feet of a bunch of enemy cowards but they would strip the very skin off their compatriots for a debt of 4 fillérs.”¹⁶

Readers sometimes found stories about people standing their ground against violent POWs. Mrs. János(né) Kita, a lady farmer from Szarvas, employed two Russians. One sneaked into her bedroom under cover of the night. The woman, however, counter-attacked and “bit the Russki’s arm so hard that the chap aborted his attempt at such hard-to-reach heavenly bliss.” The POW was arrested by gendarmes.¹⁷

Recollections of a POW Supervision Officer

News stories were oftentimes based on uncontrollably spreading information or rumor and specific bits were presented to the readers in enhanced versions or, indeed, elaborate tales. National Militia Guard Captain Gyula Dobay, the POW Supervision Officer tasked with controlling and processing POWs held at the Szeged area, however, published his own personal experiences and memories in a book brought out in 1925.¹⁸ Two detachments of forced laborers arrived at the lower end of Szeged’s regional center of farms in the summer of 1915. They were required exclusively by small holders who had eluded the draft. However, the drafted farmers’ “womenfolk expressly asserted that they would not allow any aliens, let alone males of an enemy state, to set foot on their estates.” In 1916, though, they were also forced to require POWs due to the worsening labor shortage. Nevertheless, it was generally

acknowledged that “...a Hungarian woman is protected from any temptation to come into indecent contact with POWs by her honest housewifely manner, well-inculcated decorum, and unbreakable loyalty to her husband and nation. She is also protected, though, by her contempt and bitter ruefulness felt upon fathoming the immeasurable void which separates the POW from her man, father and brother. This is how she feels for the POW whose work is hardly up to the standard of adolescent, or indeed, female laborers. If a Hungarian woman can’t admire someone as every inch a man, she will never lower herself to his level. Good-natured, big-hearted and full of pity as she might be, prompting her to treat POWs in the fairest and most generous way, she will always be able to keep them at a respectable distance.”¹⁹

In spite of this, illicit affairs had developed in Szeged of which the well-informed supervision officer gave “accurate” sociographical accounts supported by extensive statistical data. Despite all efforts to supervise and control them, Russian POWs usually managed “to find fulfillment with loose women whom the community had known to have earned a living from selling their bodies. Although not great in numbers, such persons lived in every farm districts without the authorities having any knowledge of their existence.”²⁰ The next target group of interest for POWs was that of female laborers employed in major agribusinesses. Some of those women “sacrificed themselves for monetary rewards, in most cases leading licentious lives without the knowledge of their employers.” Another category was reserved for “inexperienced” maids who were “not properly overseen by their employers, consequently, they couldn’t help falling victim to POWs.” Finally, Dobay adds POW’s “romantic affairs” with their female employers to his classification. One of these incidents was reported by a POW protagonist himself. “During one of my tours of inspection [the chap] requested to be redeployed to another workplace on grounds of his female employer having forced him to do inhumane amounts of work on a daily basis and to ‘lie in for’ her husband at night, a lifestyle the strains of which his body could no longer withstand.”²¹ Another six

¹⁶ *Russki POW Stubbed. Szarvas és vidéke*, March 26, 1916 2.

¹⁷ *Russki Laborer Bitten. Szarvas és vidéke*, August 6, 1916 2.

¹⁸ Dobay had completed law school. For a brief period in the fall of 1919, he served as Government Commissioner & High Sheriff of Csongrád County and the town of Szeged. Later he became editor-in-chief of the racist newspaper *Szegedi Új Nemzedék*.

¹⁹ Dobay 1925: 11–12; 81–82.

²⁰ Dobay call them prostitutes.

²¹ The author also alleges that the POW was 32 years old, the female employer 42, a woman who “had led a loose life with her male farmhands even before the war.”

incidents cited were grounded on suspicion that certain widows had “gradually been stripped POWs off from their official status. Eventually, they had been fashioned into proper Magyar gentleman farmers. Dressed in the KIA husbands’ Sunday best, they regularly hung out with their ‘mistresses.’ On one occasion, a POW had accompanied his lady to the movies and the guard mistook him as a deserter.” Women like this went to any lengths – including lawyering up – to make sure their POWs were not taken away from them. Potential POW rotations offered by authorities were not accepted. Dobay’s preliminary suspicion, therefore, had been confirmed: “Despite all the women’s denials, what we’re dealing with here is true and unselfish love which has been mercilessly torn apart by the unrelenting articles of military and moral code.”²²

A former military officer responsible for the territorial integrity of the hinterland and the proper behavior of POWs had created a Christian/conservative female ideal in his “chronicles,” which became a patriotic virtue in the years of war. An honorable and respectable Hungarian woman was to be protected from displaying indecent behavior by her loyalty to her nation and husband. Not only by that, but also by a sense of cultural superiority over Russian POWs which prompted her to treat her prisoners in a compassionate and humane way. This moral code, however, was associated with situative perspectives and specific social groups. It was always considered to have been violated only by subservient maids who were not accountable for their acts, or outcast “prostitutes.” Other violators, if any, had to be war widows, or women who had lost their husbands before the war.²³

Summary

The ban on sexual encounters was probably the most crucial element of overseeing POWs since

the political establishment viewed the issue as a danger to the sanctity of family life as well as to the morale of civilians and the fighting spirit of combat troops. Therefore, the state was “fully justified” in interfering in women’s private lives making it a visible part of politics, propaganda, and the public sphere.²⁴ Media outlets often called women out by name to humiliate, even denigrate them, often alluding to their guilt in unmistakable terms (while the POWs largely remained anonymous). Contemporary accounts also reveal that no uniform language had been developed to describe the phenomenon (the relevant decrees of the Minister of Interior were also rather vague), and the tone of the various stories expressed a range of different ethical standards. The harsh moral judgement, patriotic rhetoric and punishment mirrored the attitude of the political establishment. Certain accounts went as far as forecasting possible repercussions or post-war impacts on the state and local communities (e.g. unintended childbirths and break-ups of affected families). Anecdotal, sometimes humorous motifs and occasional examples of vernacular usage, on the other hand, seem to point to the presence of “folk-oriented” public knowledge/discourse, which was more sympathetic to illicit sexual liaisons than the established norms, effectively legalizing the practice of “shacking up with the enemy.”

It would be difficult to measure the frequency of shorter or longer affairs, diverging or intertwining motives, or the diversity of emotional involvement. A contemporary news item discussed uncontrollable “life instinct.” In a literary critique, Péter Veres presented a rational economics-oriented explanation asserting that POWs doing agricultural labor and assisting lady farmers had been integrated into their host households as de facto masters.²⁵ Many culprits of sexual misdemeanors obviously tried to keep their deeds in secret. Those deeds invariably resulted in shame and guilty conscience oftentimes leading to family tragedies. Others, however, were quite open about

²² Dobay 1925: 83–89.

²³ Dobay’s intense fascination with the POW issue is aptly evidenced by the fact that he even penned a folk drama titled *Nikolai* in 1920. A Russian POW is deployed to serve a smallholder and falls for his daughter, Rózsika, who returns the prisoner’s love. As it turns out later, the girl’s wounded fiancé, Feri, is being looked after by Nikolai’s sister, Helena, and they also fall in love with each other. Thus, all the obstacles to those respective nuptials of Feri and Helena’s and Rózsika and the naturalized Magyar, Nikolai’s, have been overcome. *Nikolai. Délmagyarország*, March 27, 1920 4–5; “*How Much is Nikolai*”? *Szeged*, February 2, 1924 3; Péter 1955: 118.

²⁴ Hämmerle 2000: 259–261.

²⁵ “A fine lady smallholder had good POWs who labored as hard as if they were farming their own fields at home. And—as it sometimes happened—a man who was plowing the soil and tending the animals as affectionately as the master, who was fighting or had, indeed, perished in a faraway land, whom even the children had gotten used to, was not to be treated as a prisoner, or billeted in a cowshed. Decorum dictated that he was to be served at the family table with meals cooked from produce they had grown together. And the family table is just a step or two away from the nuptial bed.” Veres 1978: 507.

moving in together and taking the consequences. Hardly is it possible, therefore, to assign general meanings to actions and feelings, although William Reddy's conceptual framework of "emotional regimes" might be of help. Not only did the political establishment ban exchanges with POWs. It also prescribed peremptory behaviors and emotional norms to follow. Hungarian women were to remain loyal to their husbands who fought at the front with a very high likelihood of getting killed in action. They were to put up with all their sufferings and vicissitudes in a graceful, indeed, heroic fashion. It is also reasonable to assume, though, that once husbands, fiancés, or brothers had been deployed, the closely-knit networks of family, relatives, and neighbors, providing control and discipline, but also social protection and emotional care, began to unravel. In a situation like this, POWs, having been integrated into family groups of farming communities, may have provided a measure of "emotional safe haven."²⁶

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²⁶ Another term used by Reddy. 2001: 129.