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German Women in the First World War – an Emancipation?

Rural Society as a Case Study

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I have included the term 'emancipation' in the title of my presentation, and that is a mistake which I can only remedy if I have triggered your interest in my paper by using it. Emancipation is the wrong term because it was not part of the contemporary lexicon that middle-class women and representatives of the bourgeois women's movement used when they described the underlying imperatives of their work. The use of 'emancipation' was mainly reserved in late Wilhelmine Germany in connection with debates over the Jewish minority, whereas feminist demands were couched in terms of 'rights' and 'duties' and regarding specific feminine qualities. Prior to 1914, the bourgeois women's movement had not demanded wholesale equality between men and women, but had always justified its demands for equality in specific fields — for instance education and professional qualifications — on the grounds of a specific calling (*Beruf*) of women that was based on femininity (*Weiblichkeit*). During the war, the League of Women's Associations (Bund deutscher Frauenvereine, BDF), founded in 1894 as the largest umbrella group of the women's movement, aligned itself with the German state and placed itself entirely at the service of the national war effort.[1] This contribution, however, was seen as a bargain for increased citizenship rights for women. When the bourgeois women's movement defined its contribution during the war, it talked about the 'Kriegsleistung der Frau', a 'female service to the war effort'.[2]

The semantics of the women's movement is a relevant field of inquiry. Yet there is also the other question whether ordinary women used the term 'emancipation' to describe their individual aspirations and the subjective perception of their own situation. And, finally, we can ask whether emancipation can be used by historians to describe wartime processes. Historian Kathleen Canning admits that this use of the term is problematic. Canning argues: 'Even if emancipation is not an apt term to describe women's wartimes experiences [in Germany 1914–1918, BZ], the war did provide women with crucial lessons in citizenship that would shape their participation in the early years of Weimar politics.'[3] In her brief survey on gender and politics in Weimar Germany, Canning offers a differentiated perspective on the wartime transformations. She rightly emphasises that middle-class women took on 'active role[s]' in public life, in 'wartime welfare of children and mothers' and other fields of social intervention. But also for working-class women, Canning asserts, the war provided a 'transformative experience' 'as they moved into

skilled and higher-waged jobs usually reserved for men and formed a civic consciousness in the bread lines [of women queuing for food in the cities, BZ] that became a symbol of civilian hardship and hunger on the home front."[4] Both arguments are qualified and contextualised in relation to a specific social class, for middle-class women and working-class women respectively. Yet Canning adds another, far-reaching assertion: 'Women of **all** social classes', she writes, 'enjoyed a new independence from men during the war in both the family and the public sphere and gained unprecedented recognition from the state for their contributions to Germany's war effort, leading some to conclude that the war had an emancipatory effect on German women."[5] The reservation about the usefulness of the term 'emancipation' is clear. But the claim of the enjoyment of a new form of independence is strong and applied across the board.[6]

Kathleen Canning is not the only historian who has proposed important arguments about the changes that the First World War brought for German women. In her book on soldiers' wives of the First and Second World War and the so-called 'family support' for them—subsidies paid out by the state—, Birthe Kundrus has put forward another point. According to Kundrus, the alienation between spouses in the First World War created a potential for conflict and, particularly among women, a drive towards more independent life planning and articulation of interests, something that undermined traditional gender roles. Kundrus argues that the traditional model of a 'family provider'—that is the paternalistic rule of the man in the family—was 'shaken to the very foundations' in the wake of the First World War. Statements of contemporary observers such as the Social Democratic Member of the Reichstag, Paul Göhre, who predicted a 'scene of devastation' of gender relations in the wake of the war, serve as evidence for this argument.[7] Furthermore, Kundrus points to the rapidly growing divorce rate from 1919 onwards.[8] However, she does not take into account the fact that particularly marriages resulting from hasty 'emergency weddings', registered during or immediately after the war, ended disproportionately more often in divorce than other marriages.[9] Thus, divorce figures from 1919 onwards are not necessarily indicative of a fundamental crisis of marriage that might point to an underlying crisis of gender relations.

I am sceptical about these arguments and claims, not least with regard to the evidence on which they are based. The aims and the policies of the bourgeois women's movement are clearly spelled out in their many publications. Whether a 'civic consciousness' was formed in the bread lines among women who queued for food is more difficult to ascertain. The reference point for this argument is the study by Belinda Davis, a detailed investigation of consumer protests and food riots in Berlin during the war. Davis develops an argument about a new form of female citizenship that was shaped by voicing demands for a just and sufficient provision and distribution of food. Most of the primary sources that support this argument, however, come from police reports and from internal memos and letters by state officials in Berlin, prominently among them the Berlin police

president, Traugott von Jagow.[10] These findings are important enough, as they corroborate that the state was aware of the increased bargaining power and agency of urban women during the war, and had to contemplate giving citizenship rights or at least symbolic recognition in return, as a systematic crackdown against these food protests was deemed inappropriate.

Yet again I would ask whether this type of documentation is sufficient to corroborate the growth of a 'civic consciousness' (Canning), as consciousness clearly requires some form of source materials that shed light on personal perceptions and communications, such as diaries, letters to friends and relatives or letters to the authorities in the form of petitions or supplications (*Eingaben* in German parlance). The main problem with these types of sources is obviously that they hard to come by at least for the lower strata of the population. Several leading members of the bourgeois women's movement have written autobiographies or their personal papers with wartime correspondence have survived. For working-class women, such documentation is scarce, and exceptions, such as the helpful edition of the wartime correspondence between the Pöhland family from Bremen, first published in 1982, bring their own problems as they tend to come from women who were active in the socialist labour movement and are thus rather unrepresentative due to their high level of class consciousness and agency.[11] For women from the countryside, i.e. the wives of farmers and female farm labourers of any sort, the situation is even more dire. Some farming families have kept the papers of their ancestors and we thus have wartime correspondence. For female farmhands, such sources are almost impossible to come by in private collections.

Yet one thing is working to the advantage of the historian, and that is the increasing interest that the state took during the war in the opinions and perceptions of ordinary people. In a seminal article, Peter Holquist has described the First World War as the period in which a 'security state' emerged across Europe, in Britain as well as in first Tsarist and then Bolshevik Russia, and one crucial effect of this was the practice of state surveillance of private correspondence.[12] This is familiar to everyone who has studied front line experiences, as postal censorship units were part and parcel of military operations in all major European armies by 1916 at the very latest, allowing the historian extensive insights into the mentalities of front line soldiers. Surveillance of correspondence by civilians was patchy, but exceptions prove the rule. I am able to draw on an exceptional cache of records, surveillance of wartime correspondence that passed through a railway postal station in Munich and was put under special scrutiny by the military authorities. Here, samples were taken from about 70,000 letters that passed through the postal office every day from and to Bavaria, Saxony and Silesia. From March 1917, these samples served as the basis of handwritten excerpts made by the painter Adolf Schinnerer, who was ordered by his military commanders to work on this surveillance. Schinnerer's excerpts of about 1,000 letters have survived. As he explained in a memorandum on the principles of his work,

Schinnerer was mainly interested in the 'extent and nature of the emotions and thoughts of the people regarding the war' and 'how it affected the people'.[13] Schinnerer kept his focus on passages that are relevant to the cultural historian, even though his superiors pressed him to provide information that was usable from a military point of view.

Most of the personal statements of women that I quote in the following come from these letters that Adolf Schinnerer has read and excerpted. My focus here is on German women who lived in the countryside, or, to use another term, in a rural society in which social structure and social interaction were predominantly ruled by property—or lack of it—of plots of arable land. This focus on women who are working in agriculture is not a marginal perspective, as I want to emphasise right away and with some force. If we take the data of the 1907 census, then we see that at the eve of the First World War still around a third of the gainfully employed Germans worked in agriculture and forestry. If we formulate this in terms of settlements, we have to consider that in the villages not everyone worked in agriculture, but small shopkeepers, artisans etc. added to the mix. This means that effectively more than a third of the population lived in social contexts that can be described as rural.

Late Imperial Germany included a wide range of different agricultural regions in which work on farms still dominated overall, from the Prussian provinces east of the river Elbe—Pomerania, West and East Prussia—with their large estates and smaller peasant farms, to those regions in which medium-sized farms dominated.[14] Bavaria, and here specifically the south of Bavaria, which included the districts of Upper and Lower Bavaria and Bavarian Swabia, was one of these. In 1907, agriculture occupied almost 70 percent of the economically active population in Lower Bavaria, about 53 percent in Swabia and around 59 percent in Upper Bavaria—excluding the flourishing city of Munich. The rural population lived in numerous scattered villages and small market towns, the number of isolated farms and small hamlets increasing as one neared the Alps. While only around a third of the German population lived in rural communities in 1925, even then more than 50 per cent of Bavarians lived in settlements of less than 2,000 people, and almost 20 per cent in those with less than 500 inhabitants. Southern Bavaria was a traditional farming region. The largest group, both in terms of number of farms and area under cultivation, was made up of medium-sized farms of 5-20 hectares. Such farms worked around 42 per cent of the land in Upper Bavaria and 45 per cent in Lower Bavaria. In southern Bavaria, this group of farms lay more often than elsewhere in the German Empire at the upper limit of 20 hectares. Large estates of over 100 hectares meanwhile were few and far between in *Altbayern*.[15]

Rural society faced an entirely new situation during the war. Conscription removed a significant portion of the male population from their villages for several years. Here I will discuss the consequences for women working in agriculture—primarily peasant wives. I focus on how these women interpreted the war and the changes it brought with it. The

analysis first highlights their work as agricultural producers and charts changes in the gendered division of labour. The paper then scrutinises conditions within peasant families. Did their husbands' absence influence how peasant women understood their role? Did it affect their emotional relationship with their husbands? These issues were closely linked in peasant womens' subjective perception. They mirror the structures of the peasant family economy, in which there was very little space for an ideal notion of male and female roles separate from working life. Men and women were basically expected to carry out certain tasks. Beyond this, however, gender relations were also embedded in a moral order. Offenses against the rules of this order which occurred during the war show that peasant women, at least to some extent, were protected by their social context within the patriarchal structure of the farm.[16] For an exploration of these issues, we have only few sources at our disposal. This applies especially to war letters by peasant women, mainly because only a few soldiers held on to the letters they received or brought them back while on furlough. The letter excerpts collected by Adolf Schinnerer, intended to be representative, help make up for the lack of private materials.

The figures relating to Bavaria in the census of 1916 help us determine how many men running their own farms were called up. They indicate a 36.3 per cent decline in self-employed male agricultural workers. As this occupational survey, unlike others, was carried out during winter, when there was less work to do, this decline is not fully reflected in the increase in the number of female farm heads. If we assume that the number of self-employed farmers was the same as in 1907, around 44 per cent of all farms were headed by a woman in 1916. Thus, a large proportion of the remaining male workers consisted of youths and elderly men. According to the census of 1916, almost 27 per cent of male agricultural workers were younger than 16 and a good 16 per cent were older than 60 years. The main group to make up for the labour shortage, increasingly pressing from 1915 on, were prisoners of war. Most were engaged in agriculture. In late 1916, 46,305 prisoners of war (POWs) were working in Bavarian agriculture. In the spring of 1917, this had climbed to around 62,000. Farmers preferred POWs to urban women or *Hilfsdienstpflichtige*, those liable according to the Auxiliary Service Law of 1916, because they generally worked hard and were relatively cheap. The latter groups, moreover, were expected of being mainly interested in improving their diet. POWs did not, however, come close to replacing conscripted men, particularly given that the number of Russian prisoners declined rapidly following the end of the war with Russia in 1918. Large farms heavily dependent on non-family labour were worst affected by the labour shortage. For small and medium-sized farms of up to 20 hectares, which had in any case employed more women than men before the war, men on leave from the replacement army helped balance things out.[17]

The workload of peasant women had been huge even in peacetime. The dearth of male workers meant they had to do more than ever and take on a greater range of tasks

during the war. Traditionally, depending on the size of the farm and how many non-family workers were employed on it, men were largely responsible for the demanding work involved in cultivation of the fields, especially ploughing and reaping. Women had to work in the fields only on smallholdings, on farms mainly growing root crops or during the busiest period of the grain harvest. During the war, they were forced to work constantly in the fields. The wife of a farmer wrote in September 1917:

> We brought in the hay and corn with great effort. Things aren't looking too good with the summer cereal because of the long dry spell we had here, but there are lots of potatoes and cabbage. Once again, there will be enough, though we're not allowed to use too much. But we always eat our fill, dear sister. I have to do Josef's work as well of course. It's hard for me sometimes. The ploughing for instance isn't going too well and having to do all the driving [of a harnessed team, BZ]. You yourself know what a farmer's life is like. Just imagine, when there's no man around, all the things you have to do. [...] You really do nothing but work, which I don't much like, always stuck with the worldly side of things, where you can't stay anyway. I treasure solitude and keeping company with God more than anything else. I trust God to take care of my destiny. He'll do what's best.[18]

The remaining male workers also had to work more as a result of conscription. At harvest time, it was not unusual for people to work from 3am until 9pm in the fields. In the spring of 1915, one farmer was shocked to discover that his wife was able to write to him only at around 11pm. The women had to cope with increased outside work. This would have been more or less impossible if the men's absence had not caused the birth rate to fall rapidly, reducing the need to look after small children. They also had to do their usual work in the house. Peasant women were thus subject to intense physical strain. Forced to manage without adult male help, their mood was highly despondent: '3 years of working alone like a huge brute, people can't take it any more. We've already done a lot for God, and no end in sight. We had enough work to do before the war but no human being would have believed it would get as bad as this.'[19]

The subjective perception of injustice further sharpened the sense of being overstretched. Married peasant women fit their extra work into the context of restrictions in production and consumption brought about by the controlled economy, a system of ceiling prices for agricultural produce and of delivery quotas for some products. Urban dwellers were frequently the subject of comparison. These were believed to benefit from agricultural policies. Industrial workers were not thought to work enough to justify such special treatment, especially in comparison to their rural counterparts. The impression took hold that one's own efforts were of benefit only to city folk: 'How are you? Like us perhaps. We have nothing left to eat at all, just a lot of hard work. They take from us and give to the

urban people. Now they've taken our entire harvest. I'm doing no more, even if we end up starving.'[20]

After three years of war, more and more peasant women managing alone suffered from abdominal pains and miscarriages, resulting from the constant physical over-exertion. Towards the end of the war, their capacity to work declined rapidly. Mortality in rural regions, however, increased less than in the cities because rural dwellers were better fed. Women struggled not only with the greater amount of work, but also with tasks previously reserved to men. Training and driving the teams of horses and other draught animals necessary to work in fields was a task left to the men within the usual division of labour. In the case of horses, this was due to the great prestige associated with owning and working with them, but also with the great strength and skill it took to drive them. It was particularly hard to do without the men in this respect. Traditionally, men were also responsible for business management tasks such as dividing up the individual plots of land in line with the desired crop rotation, determining dates to sow and harvest and for buying and selling cattle and horses. Here too, peasant women were generally dependent on advice from their husbands, given in detailed written instructions from the field.

These realities cast doubt on the notion that peasant women made progress towards becoming the equal partners of their husbands during the war by running their farms. Peasant women managing alone were dependent on the help and advice of their husbands and had great trouble disciplining farm labourers, though most were still youths. Neither could the women count on any special consideration from the remaining male farm owners. These were clearly not prepared to accept the changes in women's sphere of activities made necessary by the war. One early anonymous complaint referred to their 'heartless tyranny' vis-à-vis the 'women left behind', expressed among other things in the enticement of farm labourers.[21] Often, in meeting their delivery quotas, soldiers' wives were ultimately powerless in the face of the constraints imposed by the male personnel of district authorities as well as mayors. The wife of one farmer wrote to her husband: '[I] am very pleased, we've produced a lot of corn. But you can't take pleasure in it because you're only allowed to work and they do what they want with the results. You have to do it whether you like it or not. We feel like slaves, we become desperate how they treat the peasant people.'[22]

As well as maintaining and managing agricultural production, peasant women coping on their own were subject to heavy strains with respect to their personal ties to family members in the field. The most palpable and profound effect of the war was the death of husbands and sons. Early casualty reports quickly caused an intensive longing for peace. Women who had lost a relative relied mainly on the empathy of family members as they coped with their sorrow. Within the village, the even greater losses suffered by neighbours made one's own loss easier to bear. In any event, the conception of the kingdom-come associated with the Christian interpretation of death offered consolation. Reli-

gious conviction also strengthened the patience of soldier's widows:

> Dear Anna, it is surely painful for both me and you that the children have lost their father so early, but we must remember that it was God's will. Dear God will continue to look after us. He is our best father, who takes care of widows and orphans. We must pray to Him every day asking that he does not abandon us. No one who has sought refuge in Him has ever been turned away. We must trust in God, and everything will be all right.[23]

According to one parish priest, only a few of the wives of the fallen in his parish 'grumbled', while the others 'meekly [bore] their fate'. Even extreme personal and economic stress was 'borne' by peasant women in the name of the 'holy will of God'.[24] The Sacred Heart of Jesus cult, which became increasingly popular in rural communities during the war, propagated a self-sacrificing mentality characterised by humility and self-denial. Its practitioners were mostly women. In the case of the many missing soldiers, women could not even be sure whether their relatives might still be alive. Peasant women also showed a willingness to suffer, embedded in religious notions, in relation to the increasing problems they faced in disciplining their children in the absence of paternal authority:

> Regarding our children. They do as they are told all right with the help of the cane, especially Jakob. They need to be told what's what. They're still children of course. All of them are scared of having too much to do, even Hans. The more you have the more difficult it is. They're always fighting. Hans and Mari would try the patience of a saint. I could tell you a thing or two, but I'll hold my tongue. I have my cross to bear and no doubt I've earned it.[25]

Unlike the men who remained at home, whose participation in communion generally declined markedly in the second half of the war, women's religious zeal remained largely unchanged. Peasant women were reinforced in their extremely passive attitude to the strains of the war by their expectation of a peace that could ultimately be delivered only through divine providence. This religiously inspired interpretation of the war was bound up with the notion of a social order grounded in morality, based on a just division of burdens. However, this religious interpretive model, common at both the front and home front, became less and less persuasive as time went by. For such hopes to be fulfilled people had to behave impeccably in both religious and moral terms; it was essential for them to embrace repentance and penitence. The moral decline apparent in the most varied realms of society, however, seemed to make hopes of divine assistance increasingly obsolete. If 'people [became] ever lower and worse', the efforts of the virtuous would be all for nothing.[26] The collapse of the moral order of society thus also affected those who conti-

nued to believe in this ideal. Commenting on the affairs pursued by soldiers' wives, an Upper Bavarian peasant woman regretfully stated: 'The German women are getting worse and worse. Now God must deny peace even to the good women.'[27]

It no longer made sense to interpret the war, as did the priests in their sermons, as God's punishment, when war profiteers were able to enrich themselves at the expense of the public good with a clear conscience. Peasant women's forbearance reached its limits when their relatives lost their lives, and this was reflected in their behaviour. Like some soldiers, more and more people at home came to believe that the war was being pursued by the powerful only to decimate the working population: 'People are now saying openly what they once only whispered in secret, that the war is happening so that there are less people and the powerful have more power over the poor again.'[28] Some peasant women came to straightforward conclusions in light of the death of the sons they had raised with such effort at the hands of the 'powerful': they became increasingly willing to practice birth control.

Whether the long separation alienated peasant wives from their husbands emotionally and caused them to feel released from the ties of matrimony is as important as it is difficult to answer. Several pieces of evidence suggest that this was not the case. First, communication by letter was of great importance to women, as it was to their relatives in the field. The constant exchange of letters helped bolster emotional stability. Letters from the field were however also evidence of their husbands' freedom from bodily harm: 'My dear husband, I'm happy to work again now because I've had another sign of life from you. I can't describe the joy we felt, which was great indeed.'[29] Separation from one's husband eventually became an oppressive normality.

Rather than making the women feel increasingly alienated from their husbands, separation generally made them 'long boundlessly for peace and their husbands' return', a feeling which intensified with time.[30] This desire was rooted in the peasant women's conviction that there was nothing good about being on one's own. They wished both for the return of a qualified labour force and of the person with whom they had the closest emotional connection. Securing the economic stability of the farm was the dominant motive here. Sometimes, however, peasant wives were simply worried about the wellbeing of a familiar individual with whom they had shared a home for so long: 'Dear Christoph, today is the Whitsun festival. How much longer will you be away? You may never come home, and if you should never come, what am I to do then and how will I cope? I would rather be with you, along with the children. There would be nothing left for me in this world'.[31]

The relationship between peasant spouses thus throws the limits of a purely economic interpretation of the peasant family economy into particularly sharp relief. Even the few women who felt satisfaction at having coped well with their enforced independence longed for their husbands. Women were as keen to see their husbands again as the latter were to get home, key evidence that spatial separation did not lead to emotional alie-

nation. Whether peasant women felt that their husbands' habituation to warfare might threaten the future peace and civility of married life is hard to judge. However, their sympathy for the burdens borne in the field is likely to have been uppermost in their minds. The opportunity to have relationships with other men did however represent a threat to peasant marriages, particularly when husbands were away for a long time. It was primarily the profound moral disgrace of an illegitimate relationship that disciplined peasant women in this respect. A letter to a POW from 1917 lays this bare:

> I have to tell you that there's plenty of amour going on in R., and not just among the young girls but the married women too. There are three of them in the village putting on such a performance that it's a disgrace for the whole community, you won't be surprised to hear that the first is the wife of St.Schorß. It's lucky for her that Schorß has been taken prisoner, so at least she is safe. Frankl was in play before, then he had to report for duty. Now she has a sergeant. He even bought her a ribbon for her hair. Then there's F. Nandl and the wife of O. Heinrich, there was a terrible commotion there one night, they had their door smashed, all sorts of insults will be flying there. I can't begin to tell you all the things that are going on and how bad people are becoming. This war hasn't improved anything. I'm always being held up as an example by various people, because you've been away for such a long time, and no one has heard the slightest thing about me. Not that I have a high opinion of myself, it is of course my holiest duty, but you are just happy to have a clear conscience and be seen by others as a proper person. In any case I could never do that to my dear little man.[32]

Unmarried maids were not significantly concerned about their standing in the eyes of the village public when pursuing their flirtations. The moral constraints which affected farm owners because of their need to preserve their vested property did not apply to them. Other than dismissal by their employers, there was no effective means of controlling them. This is probably one reason why maids entered into sexual relations with POWs working on farms more often than married peasant women. Of the latter group, it was mainly those whose husbands had died or were missing who had such relationships despite the risk of moral and legal condemnation.[33]

Increasing numbers of farmer's daughters and maids entered into relationships with POWs despite threats of punishment by the military authorities; these relationships often came to light only when the girl became pregnant. The names of these women were printed in the official gazette to discourage such behaviour. Priests warned against moral offences from the pulpit and threatened to take action. POWs in the villages, however, were monitored only very superficially. Because their labour input made them indispensable, most were thoroughly integrated into the farmer's household. People sometimes re-

frained from reporting such incidents out of fear that the prisoner would be taken away. In light of the prevailing public climate, in which relationships with POWs were condemned as shameless and as a dereliction of national duty, anonymous informers took the opportunity to shame those neighbours with whom they had fallen out. Despite the heightened sensitivities of a nationalist-minded middle-class public, POWs generally integrated smoothly; they worked closely together with maids on a daily basis. These were favourable conditions for intimate relations to develop. These young women fell in love easily and sometimes even wished to marry a prisoner. If such relationships resulted in pregnancy, however, maids and farmers' daughters often found out how difficult it was for someone in their social position to have a baby.[34]

Towards the end of the war, there was much desolation and desperation among women in the countryside. The social factors which triggered emotional responses were as varied as the emotions themselves. But key factors can be summarised: many women were worn out after a long separation from their spouses, particularly if the husband had been taken as a POW and it was entirely unclear when she would meet him again. Economic hardship and the constraints of the so-called controlled economy for agricultural produce added to this.[35] Physical exhaustion as the result of a triple burden—work on the farm, in the household and raising the kids—was another major factor. At least for rural Bavaria, the key difference in the responses between farmer's wives and urban women seems to have been the existence of a normative moral order that was based on Catholic notions of the prospect of salvation in the netherworld. This prospect, and the Catholic teaching about the need for deference vis-à-vis the state authorities, surely allowed many Bavarian women who worked on farms to accept the strains of war. But in every normative order based on religion, the plausibility of this order can be broken, and a turn away from the established normative models takes place. Thus, it is no huge surprise that towards the end of the war Adolf Schinnerer recorded the voices of women who saw only one way out of their misery: suicide. The following is an excerpt from a woman in Lower Bavaria who wrote on 28 August 1917 to her husband, who had been taken captive as a POW:

> One gets sick and tired of human life that I want to cut my and the children's throats, I do not fear the sin, one is driven to it to escape misery. The most stupid person on God's earth is the one who has children, they are robbed of their breadwinner so that they are starving to death, they cry for bread the whole day, for 33 Pfennig, which are paid for one child, they can't eat their fill, not even once a day. … I have four little children, none of them earns anything, I have to feed them, wash them, mend their clothes pp I have to stand in the streets all day long and wait for hours to get the little food that is distributed, if one doesn't do that one gets nothing, as it is in the villages, and thus I can't earn anything, the few hundred marks that we

have saved up I had to spend during the last three years and thus we have to perish miserably if one does not voluntarily depart from life, so don't you long for such a vale of tears be glad that you are in France. Soon winter is coming it is often said that soldiers' wives get preferential treatment in getting wood, I have been running my legs off but I don't get a chip of wood nor coal for money, on the contrary, where the men are there is no misery, who cares about a soldier's wife with several children, she can perish as thanks that her husband has been in the field for three years or taken prisoner, if you were still in the field I wouldn't let you there it is better for all of us to get shot or I would send you the children to the front.[36]

A few concluding remarks. There are reasons to remain sceptical in regard to general remarks about a new civic consciousness that emerged among German women during the war. Such a new subjective sense of entitlement and citizenship would have to be found in the personal testimony of German women during the war. Using a regional example, I have demonstrated that the strains of war did not empower women in the countryside to seek some form of emancipation. This general assertion, however, has to be qualified: female farmhands and maids who were engaging in sexual relations with POWs were indeed stepping outside of the narrow confines of the village order and were using the opportunity to seek a freedom that had not always been in their reach before the war.

The situation for farmers and their wives, however, was on balance a different one. Neither did the war lead to a deep alienation between the spouses, nor is there substantial evidence that taking on men's work helped farmers' wives to attain the prestige traditionally associated with it in the village community. The precarious reality of peasant women managing on their own was apparent not only in their overwork, but also in their inability to defend themselves against the patriarchal behaviour of the remaining men and the authorities. Women in the countryside did not receive increased recognition for their wartime work, neither from the male elites in the villages, the village mayor in the first instance, nor from the wider state authorities. Religiously motivated patience reinforced the willingness of farmer's wives to put up with even extreme economic and personal strains. Many people began to lose hope that the war would bring about a moral renewal; a whole range of symptoms of diminishing social and religious morality coalesced, causing some to believe that the war had triggered the collapse of the moral values which had formerly held sway. Key to an explanation of this situation is the endemic inertia of the structures of rural society. They are centred around access to land, and coupled to a deeply embedded normative horizon in the case of Bavaria provided by the Catholic faith. Thus, even the upheaval of war did not lead to a substantial loosening or crisis of traditional gender relations in the countryside, as they were shaped by and embedded in the social structure of the peasant society.[37] The sexual liberation of those female farmhands who engaged in illicit relationships remained an exception. This does not mean that village society in Up-

per Bavaria had not been plagued by deep conflicts prior to 1914. Arson and poaching were two of the main outlets which young men had used before the war to voice their discontent with the hierarchical order that was imposed on them.[38] But the war removed a substantial element of discontent from the countryside when male farmhands and the sons of farmers were called up in 1914.

While the war resulted in much desperation among women in the villages, it did not further an emancipation that could be described in those terms that are defined with an eye on the bourgeois women's movement. When the war drew to a close in November 1918, the revolutionary transition government was quick to announce that women would be granted equal suffrage with men. In that sense, November 1918 was not only the moment of defeat, but also the departure point towards the full active involvement of women in the political process. Yet there is nothing in the historical record that suggests that women in the villages, whether they were farmers' wives of female farmhands, made an active contribution to prepare for this far-ranging transformation.[39]

Notes

1 See Barbara Greven-Aschoff, *Die bürgerliche Frauenbewegung in Deutschland 1894-1933*, Göttingen 1981, pp. 37-69. — An earlier version of this paper was delivered at Doshisha University Kyoto on 7 July 2019. I would like to thank Professor Osamu Hattori for the invitation to give this talk in Kyoto, Professor Tatsushi Fujihara for his perceptive and generous comment on my paper on this occasion, and Professor Akiyoshi Nishiyama for organising my trip to Japan and for facilitating the discussion in Kyoto. I would also like to thank the participants for their many critical questions that forced me to rethink my argument, namely Professor Kae Ishii, Professor Shigeko Inoue and Professor Hiromasa Imai.

2 See Birthe Kundrus, *Kriegerfrauen. Familienpolitik und Geschlechterverhältnisse im Ersten und Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Hamburg 1995, pp. 98-123, quote p. 100.

3 Kathleen Canning, 'Women and the Politics of Gender', in: Anthony McElligott (ed.), *Weimar Germany*, Oxford 2009, pp. 146-174, here p. 147.

4 Ibid., p. 147.

5 Ibid., p. 147. My emphasis.

6 For a critical assessment of the usefulness of the term 'emancipation' to describe female experiences 1914-1918 see Ute Daniel, *Arbeiterfrauen in der Kriegsgesellschaft. Beruf, Familie und Politik im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Göttingen 1989, pp. 256-273.

7 Kundrus, *Kriegerfrauen*, pp. 207-211, quotes pp. 208f.

8 Ibid., p. 208.

9 See Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War*, Oxford 1993, p. 232.

10 Belinda J. Davis, *Home fires burning: food, politics, and everyday life in World War I Berlin*, Chapel Hill. London 2000; see Belinda Davis, 'Homefront. Food, Politics and Women's Everyday Life during the First World War', in: Karen Hagemann/Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (eds.), *Home/Front: The Military, War and Gender in Twentieth-Century Germany*, Oxford 2002, pp. 115-137, here pp. 121f.

11 See Doris Kachulle (ed.), *Die Pöhlands im Krieg. Briefe einer sozialdemokratischen Bremer Arbeiterfamilie aus dem 1. Weltkrieg*, Cologne 1982.

12 Peter Holquist, '"Information is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work": Bolshevik Surveillance in Its Pan-European Context', *Journal of Modern History* 69 (1997), pp. 415–450.
13 Adolf Schinnerer, [Leitsätze für die Briefabschriften], n.d. [1917]: Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv München, Abt. IV (BHStA/IV), stv. GK I. bayer. AK 1943.
14 The best brief overview is: Wolfgang Trossbach/Clemens Zimmermann, *Die Geschichte des Dorfes. Von den Anfängen im Frankenreich zur bundesdeutschen Gegenwart*, Stuttgart 2006, here pp. 205–242.
15 See Benjamin Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany 1914–1923*, Oxford. New York 2007, pp. 15f.
16 Ibid., p. 156.
17 Ibid., pp. 156f.
18 Farmer's wife from Erdenwies to her husband, 23 September 1917: Bavarian State Library Munich, special collections, Schinnereriana (BSB, Schinnereriana).
19 Letter to a POW from Grünbach (Lower Bavaria), 7 June 1917: BSB, Schinnereriana.
20 Letter by a farmer's wife from Kissing, 8 July 1917: BSB, Schinnereriana.
21 Anonymous submission by the 'wives of the *Landsturm*' to King Ludwig III from January 1915: BHStA/IV, MKr 2822.
22 Letter by a farmer's wife from Thundorf (Lower Bavaria), 11 September 1917: BSB, Schinnereriana.
23 Letter by a widow from Obergermaringen, 22 May 1917: BSB, Schinnereriana.
24 Quoted in Ziemann, *War Experiences*, p. 160.
25 Anna Eberhard 19 October 1914 to her husband: private possession.
26 Letter by a farmer's wife from Bimwang, 3 December 1917: BSB, Schinnereriana.
27 Farmer's wife from Mühldorf at the Inn, 23 August 1917: BSB, Schinnereriana.
28 Letter from Rosenheim, 17 June 1917: BSB, Schinnereriana.
29 Excerpt from a letter by a farmer's wife from Bavarian Swabia, 27 February 1917: BHStA/IV, stv. GK I. AK 1979.
30 Commander of the 11th Bavarian Infantry Division, quoted in Ziemann, *War Experiences*, p. 162.
31 Katharine Erhardt to her husband, 19 May 1918: Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte, Stuttgart, collection Peter Knoch.
32 Letter to a POW in Rottau (district of Traunstein), 29 May 1917: BSB, Schinnereriana.
33 Lisa Todd, 'The Soldier's Wife Who Ran Away with the Russian: Sexual Infidelities in World War I Germany,' *Central European History* 44 (2011), pp. 257–278.
34 Ibid.; see also Ziemann, *War Experiences*, p. 165.
35 On the controlled economy see Robert G. Moeller, *German Peasants and Agrarian Politics, 1914–1924. The Rhineland and Westphalia*, Chapel Hill. London 1986, pp. 43–67.
36 Woman from Straßdorf to her husband, 28 August 1917: BSB, Schinnereriana; for further examples see Benjamin Ziemann, 'Geschlechterbeziehungen in deutschen Feldpostbriefen des Ersten Weltkrieges', in: Christa Hämmerle/Edith Saurer (eds.), *Briefkulturen und ihr Geschlecht. Zur Geschichte der privaten Korrespondenz vom 16. Jahrhundert bis heute*, Vienna 2003, pp. 261–282, here pp. 280f.
37 For a comparative assessment, see Benjamin Ziemann, 'Agrarian Society', in: Jay Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the First World War, vol. 2*, Cambridge 2014, pp. 382–407.
38 See Regina Schulte, *The village in court. Arson, infanticide, and poaching in the court records*

of Upper Bavaria, 1848-1910, Cambridge 1994.

39 That this was a contingent outcome is demonstrated by the active involvement of village women in the Russian revolution in 1917. See for instance Aaron Retish, *Russia's Peasants in Revolution and Civil War. Citizenship, Identity, and the Creation of the Soviet State, 1914-1922*, Cambridge 2008; Mark Baker, 'Rampaging Soldatki, Cowering Police, Bazaar Riots and Moral Economy. The Social Impact of the Great War in Kharkiv Province', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 35 (2001), pp. 137-155.