The Consumers’ War: Paris, 1914–1918

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In considering the lives of Parisians during World War I, a key theme that emerges is the struggle for a decent standard of living. Two examples illustrate this. The first comes from an editorial published in Le temps at the beginning of March 1917. Written just before the great springtime crisis of wartime morale, it contrasts trenches and the home front, war and consumerism:

While a relative calm reigns at the front, apart from a few surprise attacks to keep the troops in a state of readiness, at the rear the great offensive against the centers and strong points of food supply has begun. The attack lasts all day long, but is most fierce at certain hours. According to a schedule fixed in advance, the imposing assault columns form up, advancing not in dispersed order but in compact masses in a continuous torrent. They are after plunder, not prisoners. All the newspapers have their food communiqués: people seize them with as much curiosity and anxiety as the military communiqués. What instructions will they transmit to this formidable infantry of consumers? Henceforth the public is interested not only in the movement of armies but also in the movement of foodstuffs. We now have economic strategists who comment on and predict the food situation. . . . Ah, if only we listened to them! Paris, indeed France, would become the granary of the world.1

The second example comes from a police report on a meeting held by the Union of Trade Unions of the Department of the Seine (Union des

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1 “Nouveaux décors parisiens,” Le temps, Mar. 1, 1917.
Syndicats de la Seine) in December 1915 to organize around the issue of the high cost of living (*la vie chère*). As the report notes, things quickly got out of hand:

This meeting was intended to have a strictly private character and be reserved to working women and men who were union members. . . . However, from 2:30 p.m. on about two thousand people had gathered in the main room of the Union House: nonunion members, women, girlfriends of workers (unionized or not) who had easily gained admittance, as well as anarchists who were professionally unemployed. In the middle of the shouting the audience proclaimed [Gabriel] Pericat (a notorious pacifist) president of the meeting . . .

Bled, interrupted several times by women who cried out, “We want peace! Enough murders!” tried to outline the goals of the meeting, which were to allow everyone to speak to the issues of rents and the high cost of living. . . . He was followed by Luquet, who tried to give a report on the rents question. . . . He began to speak about the Arbitration Commissions but was very violently interrupted. The meeting turned into an uproar; people cried out, “We want to exercise our right of recall and make the Revolution! You’ve betrayed the working class!” . . . Luquet left the podium disgusted. . . . [Next] in a period of relative calm, Maxence Roldes discussed the question of wheat and sugar in a report full of statistics. The audience shouted out: “It’s the war that has caused the rise of the price of sugar and wheat! Therefore, let’s make peace!”

Both quotations blend questions of war and consumerism, underlining parallels and ruptures between the battlefield and the home front. Here, the struggle for food has become a warlike maneuver, one that according to some can be won only by achieving peace. At the same time, these texts contrast and oppose war and consumerism to each other: the precision of military campaigns set against the disorganized anger of women, nonunion workers, and the “professionally unemployed.” Both in very different ways interpret life in wartime Paris as a consumers’ war.

This article explores the idea of a consumers’ war in Paris, in particular the ways that the struggle for one’s daily bread illustrated and transformed the politics of class and gender. I use the concept of the consumer’s war to explore how consumer behavior took on the military metaphors. For many Parisians, obtaining basic consumer goods was a struggle, if not a war. The goal was not only to get enough to eat and wear at an acceptable price but also to create a society in which the supply and equitable distribution of such goods were assured. If

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2 Archives Nationales (hereafter AN), F7 13617, police report of Dec. 13, 1915.
the protagonist of the consumers’ war was the ordinary consumer, the antagonist was much more varied: not just the Germans but also speculators, corrupt or inefficient bureaucrats, and frequently other consumers. Finally, the notion of the consumers’ war underscores the centrality of the provisioning of the capital to the national war effort in general.

Specifically, I wish to complicate the idea that the war, in particular during its early years, brought an era of social peace to Paris and made class conflicts (temporarily) obsolete.³ The union sacrée certainly shaped consumer culture, especially in terms of clothing. That people of all classes bought basic consumer goods (if of different prices and qualities) meant that they could easily serve as a symbol of social and national unity. Yet for some of the same reasons basic consumer goods also functioned as a space of class conflict. Charges and countercharges about the monopolist rich, bourgeois wastefulness, the luxurious habits of workers in war industries, and the venality of both landlords and tenants flew back and forth throughout the war. Well before the crisis of the spring of 1917, as the second quotation above suggests, anger over consumer issues had the power to call national unity and wartime resolve into question. The contested nature of wartime consumerism in Paris suggests that, rather than disappearing altogether when banished from politics and industry, ideas of class conflict retreated to other areas of society. The struggle for one’s daily bread and other goods thus came to represent class struggle in general.

As Victoria de Grazia has pointed out, studies of consumer culture tend to focus on elite practices, so that consumerism is often reduced to shopping in department stores.⁴ Yet working people have a rich history of consumer behavior, as studies of consumer cooperatives have shown.⁵ This article centers on the world of working-class consumption, considering those items—food, clothing, and shelter—that made up the overwhelming majority of the working-class-family budget.⁶ In early-twentieth-century France working-class consumerism had moved well beyond simple social reproduction, as workers chose between different types of goods based on taste as well as price. At the same time,

⁴ Victoria de Grazia, introduction to The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective, ed. Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough (Cambridge, MA, 2005), 8.
⁶ See Jacques Valdour, Ouvriers parisiens d'après-guerre (Paris, 1921); also the reports in AN, F 23 188, esp. “Note sur les evaluations des dépenses alimentaires d’une famille ouvrière et d’une famille bourgeoise en juillet 1914, octobre 1917, et mai 1918.”
class still mattered: not until the Popular Front did one begin to see the rise of mass consumption and the blurring of class identities. Similarly, consumer politics stood between the movements based on the moral economy of preindustrial France and the new social movements of the late twentieth century.

The recent revival of interest in World War I that has transformed the historiography of the conflict has focused heavily on what has become known as the “home front” (a concept that emphasizes the notion of total war andalogizes civilian life with the experience of the trenches). Both social and cultural historians have considered the war’s impact on many aspects of daily life, ranging from psychology to childhood to music. Many have focused on questions of gender, considering whether or not the war contributed to female empowerment, and on its relationship to the widespread granting of women’s suffrage in 1919 and 1920. Others have considered the politics of war, outlining a trajectory in which the initial solid support for the union sacrée gave way to an increasingly vocal (although still marginal) antiwar constituency. In general, historians have considered the home front in World War I as a privileged site for the interrogation of notions of modernity.

In considering the issue of the consumers’ war in Paris, I support some of these perspectives and perhaps call others into question. Basic consumer goods were not only tremendously important during the

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war but also, as the first quotation above suggests, in a sense defined
the very notion of the home front. The search for food, clothing, and
shelter assumed an intensity far beyond that typical of peacetime, as
the usual rules governing that search seemed to shift from day to day.
Parisians spent a tremendous amount of time talking and writing about
mundane issues such as what kind of bread bakers should bake, how
much housing should cost, and what kind of clothes were appropriate
for wartime society. To a significant extent, one’s ability to obtain basic
consumer goods at a reasonable cost complemented the news from the
battlefield in judging the progress of the war as a whole.\footnote{12}

The idea of the consumers’ war both complicates and at times con
firms standard notions of social cleavage in wartime Paris. Everybody
complained about the high cost of food and housing in particular, and
demands for lower prices had a potential for cross-class alliances, or at
least sympathies, that more narrowly conceived working-class move
ments could not achieve. Moreover, consumer movements often had a
strongly nationalist tone, expressing radical discontent in a patriotic dis
course that often recalled the siege of 1870 and the Paris Commune.\footnote{13}
Even at their most radical, consumer movements often combined anti
war conviction with pro-French sentiment in ways that strikers in war
industries could not. Constituting both a militarization of civilian life
and a radicalization of consumer behavior, the consumers’ war repre
sented a new level of discursive, social, and political mobilization for
the residents of the French capital.

The World of Goods Goes to War

The sudden outbreak of hostilities in August 1914 had an immediate and
dramatic impact on consumer life in Paris. Many Parisians responded
to the crisis by hoarding food, spurred on by memories of the bitter
siege of 1870–71. Reports from Les Halles noted shortages and sharp
rises in the prices of meat, chicken, butter, and eggs. The price of pota
toes in particular skyrocketed, forcing public authorities to step in and
restrict further increases.\footnote{14} The sudden requisition by the army of many
horses and trucks normally used to transport food to the capital partly

\footnote{12} The secondary literature on consumerism in French cities during World War I remains
to be written. See Jean-Louis Robert, “Cooperatives and the Labor Movement in Paris during
the Great War,” in Fridenson, French Home Front, 280–316. For an exploration of similar issues in a
German context, see Belinda Davis, Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I
Berlin (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000).

\footnote{13} During the war Parisians made frequent references to the war and crisis of 1870–71. For
example, Le temps, Dec. 24, 1914, printed an article on Christmas during the siege of 1870.

\footnote{14} Becker, 1914; “L’alimentation à Paris,” Le Figaro, Aug. 7, 1914; “Le prix des denrées,” Le
explained the sudden shortages. Yet at the same time a gut feeling of worry about the future seized many Parisian shoppers, contradicting optimistic forecasts of victory by Christmas. As *L’humanité* reported on the second day of the war:

> A serious crisis has broken out in the food business. The population has literally rushed into the food stores. It buys the maximum that can be preserved to constitute reserve stocks, so much so that the Prefecture of Police has been forced to assign officers in almost all neighborhoods, especially in front of Dumoy and Potin stores. The price of dried vegetables and of pasta has gone up by 40 to 50 percent. Carrots are selling at ten sous a bunch, instead of three sous; the price of lettuce has almost doubled. The increase in the price of potatoes is verging on the scandalous. Prices have risen from twelve francs to twenty-four francs, and then—this was yesterday’s price at Les Halles—to sixty francs per hundred kilos. *And the potato constitutes a major part of the essential diet of the poor.*

The last line of this quotation makes the point that not all Parisians experienced food shortages equally, that the burden in fact fell most heavily on the shoulders of those least able to afford it. Thus even on the second day of the war, when all of France seemed united in the spirit of the *union sacrée*, consumerism permitted the expression of class differences.

From this position it was only a short step to denouncing price rises and shortages as the work of speculators and other economic evil-doers. Preindustrial discourses of hoarding and the manipulation of food prices as a way to make money off of the sufferings of the people quickly resurfaced and remained an important theme of popular consumer discontent during the war. Less than a month later another journalist for *L’humanité* wrote:

> Working people are beginning to view the wartime behavior of the bakers as excessive. At a time when, in the spirit of patriotism, all good citizens should help each other out, the bakers continue

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to sell bread at the price of forty-five centimes per kilo. However, the wheat harvest is abundant and, thanks to the actions of certain speculators, they can buy wheat at below-market prices. . . .

We hope that the government will make haste to give legitimate satisfaction to consumers by lowering the price of bread.17

Many of the traditional themes of moral economy, such as normative community-sanctioned prices for goods and the hatred of speculators, appear in this brief quotation and would play a major role in wartime discourses on consumerism. The appeal to patriotism strikes a new element, however. The mention of national exigencies goes well beyond the geographically limited, community-based world of preindustrial moral economy. Moreover, it casts an interesting light on popular conceptions of the union sacrée. Much has been made of the striking volte-face of the French (and European) Left from antiwar sentiment to support for national mobilization in August 1914: the triumph of nationalism over revolutionary socialism has become a key theme of twentieth-century history.18 Yet as the quotation immediately above suggests, the two ideologies did not necessarily conflict, not even in August 1914. By embracing a traditional discourse of popular consumerism, L’humanité could keep ideas of class struggle alive while at the same time wrapping them in the tricolor flag.

That consumer discontent in the early weeks of the war went well beyond the working-class Left in Paris rendered this strategy all the more effective. Shoppers of all classes hoarded food and fretted about rising prices, fearing a return of the dread days of 1870. Indignation against shopkeepers and wholesalers extended beyond poor households. In short, everyone worried about adjusting to a wartime economy. As Le Figaro put it on August 9: “The problems of food supplies and of hygiene in Paris have been of greatest concern since the start of the war. In spite of those very rigorous steps that have been taken, the population has been very affected and troubled by the sharp increase in the cost of living. People wonder how they will make do and protect themselves against famine, illness, and poverty, in short, against all the scourges that accompany such a campaign.”19

Not surprisingly, the incidents, which deserve to be called the first consumer movement in wartime Paris, emphasized strident patriotism, indeed xenophobia.20 Whereas most of the popular demonstrations that

19 “Comment vivra à Paris pendant la guerre,” Le Figaro, Aug. 9, 1914.
20 The riots of 1914 raise the question of the relationship between looting and consumer
accompanied the rush to colors in Paris acclaimed the soldiers headed for the front lines, some also took the opportunity to attack those perceived as enemies of the nation. During the evening of August 2, Parisians staged attacks against a number of stores selling food and other consumer goods to residents of the capital, usually under the pretext that they were owned by Germans or Austrians. The Maggi food stores, actually owned by a Swiss family, suffered the greatest damage; rioters invaded branches throughout Paris and its suburbs during the evening. A crowd of three hundred people completely destroyed the store in the Rue Richer. One young boy, crying, “Down with Germany!” seized a handful of eggs and began juggling them, shouting, “Who wants some Prussian eggs? Free today, come and get them!” He then smashed the eggs against the window and sang the “Marseillaise.”

Many other stores with German-sounding names felt the wrath of the Parisian crowd that evening. The Klein leather goods store on the Boulevard des Italiens was attacked by a crowd of four to five hundred men who broke all the windows, tore down the signs, and made off with some of the merchandise. Several taverns with names like Zimmer, Muller, Appenrodt, and Pschorr suffered a similar fate. In one case a crowd attacked a bar, the Chope du Châtelet, simply because a German had sought refuge there. The rioters forced their way in and demolished the interior of the establishment.

However, xenophobia alone did not explain these attacks. Rioters also targeted stores they believed were raising prices unfairly and profiteering from the crisis. Crowds attacked food stores in the nineteenth arrondissement and in suburban Aubervilliers in retaliation against price hikes there. In particular, stores seen as cheating newly mobilized soldiers on their way to the front were fair game for reprisals. Rioters broke into two shoe stores, in the Rue de Flandre and in the Boulevard de Sébastopol, accusing their owners of overcharging for the merchandise they sold the new recruits. As the prefecture of police observed: “More or less grave scenes have broken out this evening at diverse locations in Paris, where shopkeepers raised prices excessively on basic consumer goods. Certain stores have been the object of serious incidents; thieves have even taken advantage of the circumstances
to steal considerable quantities of goods and cash.” The consumer riots that broke out in Paris at the war’s beginning thus combined patriotic hatred of the enemy with resentment of rising prices and the shopkeepers and others who raised them. They demonstrated, when the war was only a few days old, the power and volatility of consumer anger. Parisians wanted their consumer purchases to support the war effort, and they refused to buy from those they viewed as enemies of the nation. Enemy aliens certainly fit this image, but so did shopkeepers making illegitimate profits off the travails of a nation struggling for its very life. In short, like the soldiers departing for the front, consumers could also do their part by fighting the enemy at home. Here again, patriotism and class resentment joined hands.

As the example of the shoe stores suggests, concerns about clothing also occupied consumers in Paris at the start of the war, but in a very different way. Few aspects of daily life mark the transition from peace to war more graphically than the donning of uniforms by millions of young men, and in August 1914 Parisians witnessed the almost overnight sartorial transformation of much of their adult male population. The “uniform” (in both senses) clothing of the soldier exemplified the *union sacrée* in visual terms: at a time when class distinctions in clothing were already on the decline, all of a sudden they seemed to vanish overnight. An observer looking at soldiers departing for the war would no longer see classes, but only French men. Figure 1 makes this point clearly. A marquise and her maid contemplate two small-scale versions of their sons in identical uniforms, the marquise commenting with some surprise how alike they look. Whereas popular discourses about food emphasized both patriotism and class distinctions, clothing seemed to show a France united in the fight for victory.

The reaction of Parisian fashion to the war crisis reinforced the idea of sartorial unity. Women throughout the world looked to Paris as the center of high fashion, and the industry made a key contribution to

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23 Ibid.


25 The world of military uniforms had its own hierarchies, of course, denoting rank and status in a much more rigid way than civilian fashion. I would argue, however, that in the early days of the war these distinctions were overwhelmed by the sheer mass spectacle of hundreds of thousands of men in uniform. On the history of uniforms, see Paul Fussell, *Uniforms: Why We Are What We Wear* (Boston, 2002); Nathan Joseph, *Uniforms and Nonuniforms: Communication through Clothing* (Westport, CT, 1986); and Liliane Funcken and Fred Funcken, *The First World War* (London, 1974).

the city’s economy. Yet Parisian fashion largely shut down at the beginning of the war. To a certain extent this resulted from scarce resources needed more urgently for the war effort, but it also reflected a sense that fashion was simply too frivolous for such serious times. Both conservatives and feminists counseled women to forget about new frocks for the time being and to devote their attention to supporting their men in uniform.27 Another consequence of the war was a certain standardization of dress at home. H. Pearl Adam, an English woman living in Paris, noted that in the early days of the war everyone in Paris, men and women, seemed to be wearing black. The classic color of mourning, black clothing (especially for women) also harked back to the peasant’s shapeless dress, an antifashion statement if there ever was one.28 Women thus sacrificed bright colors and fabrics for the somber retinue of wartime solidarity. When fashion did revive by the end of the year, the first clothing lines betrayed a pronounced military influence; even if she was not a soldier, the smartly dressed consumer could at least look like one.29

Yet while the rush to uniform cloaked some social distinctions, it highlighted others. Most obviously, it created a world divided between soldiers and civilians, between those in uniform and those in civilian garb. At the same time, it also exemplified the sharp gender divide imposed by the war: men wore uniforms, women did not.30 Whereas the men in figure 1 wear identical uniforms, the women remain clothed in traditional garb that underscores their social difference. Indeed, their difference forms a counterpoint to the men’s uniformity and only emphasizes the latter.31 The eclipse of the fashion industry in the initial weeks and months of the war downplayed this distinction in the spirit of the union sacrée. But however much fashion might strive for a military look, clothing provided one of the most salient examples of the gendered character of the home front.

In the initial weeks of the war, gender shaped views of food and clothing in contrasting ways. Both were traditionally women’s realms, yet Parisians viewed them differently. On the one hand, commentators saw questions of food price and availability as absolutely fundamental to civilian morale and the home front, requiring immediate government intervention. On the other hand, clothing was reduced to fashion, a frivolous diversion for idle women out of step with the pressing needs of an invaded nation. Consequently, whereas journalists and other social commentators acknowledged at times that housewives did most of the shopping for food, they tended to speak of the needs of consumers and of the Parisian population in general, rather than of women specifically.32 Whereas the home front was certainly a female zone, this speaks to a certain “masculinization” of a classically women’s issue that had received a new public importance. Most of the participants in the riots against Maggi and other food stores seem to have been young men, for example. Conversely, when commentators discussed clothing, they did so mostly in terms of women, and they made it clear that this was not a vital issue. The one exception to this was the question of clothing for

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30 This of course contrasts with (and perhaps complements) the idea that civilian men in wartime France were in effect feminized. On questions of masculinity and World War I, see Leonard V. Smith, “Masculinity, Memory, and the French First World War Novel: Henri Barbusse and Roland Dorgelès,” in Authority, Identity, and the Social History of the Great War, ed. Frans Coetzee and Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee (Providence, RI, 1995): 251–74; and Angus McClaren, The Trials of Masculinity: Policing Sexual Boundaries, 1870–1930 (Chicago, 1997).

31 Another important aspect of this illustration is its implicit critique of luxury for the sake of national unity. The maid is dressed as a national symbol, a kind of Marianne, and her clothing (as well as her upright, energetic poise) contrasts with the reclined position and costly garb of the marquise. In this reading, which surfaced repeatedly during the war, the union sacrée belonged above all to the people, not to the elites.

32 “Ravitaillement de Paris,” l’humanité, Aug. 8, 1914; see also l’humanité, Aug. 15, 1915; and Le temps, Aug. 8, 1914.
soldiers. As the war stabilized and it became clear that the troops might not be home in time for Christmas, Parisians began collecting winter clothes for their men at the front. At least initially, therefore, the consumers’ war effort inhabited a gender-neutral space, one that could not acknowledge the central role played by women.

The attacks on food stores at the start of the war underscored for the public authorities the immediate need to ensure adequate food supplies and acceptable prices for Parisian consumers. No commodity received more attention than bread, still a major component of the working-class Parisian diet and a source of enormous political symbolism. In regulating bread supplies and prices, France looked back in history not just to the siege and the Commune but all the way to the French Revolution. This association had such power that one of the government’s first initiatives to regulate consumer life was the revival of a July 1791 law fixing the price of bread. Moreover, throughout the war military authorities carefully monitored grain supplies for the Paris area to make certain that Parisians had enough bread. However, this close attention to bread prices and supplies did not carry over to other foods. Not until well into the war did municipal and national authorities begin addressing the price and supply of items like meat, sugar, and produce. The influence of powerful agricultural lobbies, plus the strength of a free-market ideology, effectively checked regulatory moves until the food crisis worsened significantly as the war dragged on.

In contrast, housing became an immediate source of public concern, and it remained one throughout the war. Protection from rapacious landlords and the assurance of a decent place to live became key consumer demands for Parisians.

**Housing and the Moratorium on Rents**

At the start of the Great War, Paris was known as one of the cities with the worst housing stock in Europe. Parisians paid a smaller percentage

34 From the beginning of the war Paris was ruled by military authorities as well as civilian politicians; based on the Aug. 2, 1914, decree declaring a state of siege, the Department of the Seine and adjacent areas were declared an “entrenched camp” and subject to the orders of the army. Military and civilian authorities worked together to provision the capital with food supplies in particular. This was most notable in the case of bread, which the military essentially controlled for the duration of the war. See Thierry Bonzon and Belinda Davis, “Feeding the Cities,” in Winter and Robert, *Capital Cities at War*, 327; and Pierre Darmon, *Vivre à Paris pendant la Grande Guerre* (Paris, 2002), 25–26.
35 AN, F 23 110, “Ravitaillement du camp retranché de Paris en blé.”
36 Bonzon and Davis, “Feeding the Cities,” 305–41.
of their income for housing than their neighbors in other countries, and in return they lived in places that were older, smaller, and generally in poorer condition. Indeed, many people in the French capital complained about the quality of shelter available to them, cheap or not. Rents had been rising steadily since the late nineteenth century: as a consequence, a sizable renters’ movement had sprung up in the Department of the Seine, couching resistance to the landlord (le vautour) in terms of broader questions of class struggle.

The outbreak of the war immediately produced a crisis in rental housing. With the departure of thousands of Parisian men for the front, many families were left without their principal breadwinner and thus with no way to pay the rent. In addition, the rapid mobilization of men caused a sharp economic slump in the early months of the war, throwing many people out of work. Parisians in 1914 generally paid their rent on a quarterly basis, so that payments were due in early October. The prospect of landlords throwing the soldiers’ families into the street en masse spurred the government to take rapid action. On August 14 the national government decreed a three-month moratorium on all apartments with a rent of less than a thousand francs per year, which included the overwhelming majority of Parisian apartments. The moratorium also applied to all furnished rooms, including the notorious garnis that constituted the shelter of last resort for the city’s poor. At the beginning of September this moratorium was extended to all Paris apartments, and landlords were prohibited from evicting tenants for the nonpayment of rent.

The moratorium reflected the imminence of the German armies at the start of the war and was designed largely to protect those (especially middle- and upper-class) Parisians who temporarily fled the city before the enemy advance. After the victory of the Marne the government relaxed these regulations somewhat, but its decree of January 7, 1915 (the day before quarterly rents were due), reaffirmed the rent moratorium for all units renting for less than six hundred francs per year. This

40 The conservative Le Figaro, Sept. 3, 1914, interpreted this as a triumph of democracy and egalitarianism.
represented 77 percent of all housing in the city of Paris and 84 percent of all housing in the suburbs of the Department of the Seine. Consequently, not just working Parisians but many members of the middle class benefited from the government protection of renters.\textsuperscript{41}

Like price controls on bread, the housing moratorium represented the government’s intention to prevent consumer difficulties from spilling over into popular disaffection with the war effort and the established order in general. The hasty termination of the rent moratorium in 1871 had been a major cause of the Paris Commune, and authorities had no desire to repeat that mistake.\textsuperscript{42} Moreover, municipal and departmental officials put pressure on the national government to ensure social peace in their cities by addressing the housing question. Yet although the moratorium brought temporary relief for millions of Parisians, no one regarded it as a definitive solution to the problem of wartime housing. It of course infuriated landlords, who began organizing their own associations. But even tenants recognized that it was only a stopgap and clamored for the government to enact a conclusive solution to the problem.

This was a long time in coming. The history of French housing policy during World War I is one of indecision and temporization. Many officials felt that housing was ultimately a matter for the market, so that anything beyond temporary moratoria would prove counterproductive. Both landlords and tenants pressured their representatives to enact policies favorable to them. As a result, the government did not enact a definitive housing law until March 1918, after nearly four years of hostilities. Until then, the government went from one rent moratorium to the next, so that what had begun as an emergency measure gradually became the prevailing approach to housing in Paris during the war.\textsuperscript{43}

As Susanna Magri has pointed out, the French government took so long to address the question of rents not out of idleness but out of fear of the social and political consequences of intervening in the conflict between landlords and tenants. Concerns about further spurring the growth of a powerful tenants movement led legislators to postpone addressing the issue for as long as they could. Not surprisingly, the law that they finally passed on March 9, 1918, pleased neither side. By main-

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{41}{Magri, “Housing,” 380–81.}
\footnotetext{43}{For example, an article in Le temps, April 18, 1915, noted that the government had decreed eleven rent moratoria since the beginning of the war.}
\end{footnotes}
taining exemptions from payment of rent for many low- and moderate-income renters, it pleased tenants and angered landlords. In contrast, the establishment of arbitration commissions, which enabled landlords to claim rent payments from their tenants, gratified the former and embittered the latter. Far from appeasing this hostility, the arbitration commissions themselves became the locus for increased ill will between the two groups.⁴⁴

The basic issue was less the actions of the government than that landlords and tenants conceived of themselves as opposed groups in general. What Paul Fussell famously called “the versus habitat” dominated discourses around housing in wartime Paris.⁴⁵ The spirit of the union sacré did little to quell the bitter feeling between landlords and tenants; each group felt exploited by the other. Tenants believed that the war had made their lives much more difficult and therefore that they deserved relief from crushing rent payments rather than the loss of their homes. Renters’ advocates constantly emphasized the plight of mobilized soldiers and their families, arguing that their sacrifice should be shared by landlords and the nation as a whole. In this reading, the gap between tenants and landlords replicated that between the front lines and the rear. In contrast, landlords pointed to the many individuals who benefited from the moratoria and yet held good jobs with solid incomes. Municipal employees and war factory workers, both male and female, usually featured in such characterizations. If tenants highlighted the difficulties of mobilized soldiers, landlords emphasized the travails of the small property owners, people who rented out one unit or even a room in their own house or apartment, for whom the absence of rent spelled disaster. For landlords in general, the defense of their rights against rapacious tenants came to symbolize a defense of all the values that France was fighting for.

Not surprisingly, war metaphors crept into discourses about housing and the relations between landlords and tenants. Two newspaper cartoons illustrate this graphically. One, published in L’humanité in October 1916, depicts a union of landlords as a massive army, characterized by standardized, almost uniform appearance and hostile gazes (fig. 2). The caption reads simply “A new threatening army.” The other, which appeared in Le petit Parisien, shows a French soldier taking a German officer prisoner. It turns out, however, that the German is the soldier’s landlord, so the soldier/tenant demands his security deposit back, or else . . . (fig. 3). Both cartoons, especially the second one, play

⁴⁴ Magri, “Housing.”
⁴⁵ Fussell, Great War.
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on a certain disconnect between visual image and written word to drive home the point that the struggle between property owners and renters constituted a war.46

In February 1915 *Le temps*, a firm defender of property, recognized this conflict by running a series of articles expressing the perspectives of both tenants and landlords on the rent moratorium and on the Parisian housing situation in general. Several people, both property owners and renters, wrote in to complain about the housing situation in Paris. More often than not, they directed their anger not at public authori-

ties but at each other. One sees this especially with the landlords, who frequently viewed their tenants as unrealistic at best, lazy and venal at worst. One landlord wrote:

I own a building with both small and large renters.\(^47\) . . . Not one has paid rent, neither in October nor in January. Many of the small renters are state employees who continue to receive their entire salaries. A nurse, with a substantial clientele, earns on average fifteen francs per day, but refuses to pay fifty francs, hoping to profit from the decrees. A politician, with a good position in business, refuses to pay, under the pretext that he doesn’t earn anything. After the war the upswing in business will enable him to earn much more. . . . Why should the landlord make a gift of housing, more than the butcher, the baker, and many others?\(^48\)

\(^47\) Small renters paid less than a thousand francs per year in rent; large renters paid more than a thousand francs per year.
\(^48\) *Le temps*, Feb. 21, 1915.
Another writer attacked renters in even blunter terms: “The bad faith of renters has today reached its apogee. . . . All this sullies the French national character, which is built on honor and correctness in public affairs. People are promised impossible things: to be housed for free, to ruin landlords. All this will come back to haunt us one day.”

In presenting the case of the landlords, *Le temps* borrowed themes of hardship habitually used to depict the plight of tenants. It related the case of an upwardly mobile worker in the suburbs who rented out half of his house, using the rent money to support his widowed mother. Because of the moratorium, this woman was now left without resources. It also gave examples of landlords who were themselves mobilized soldiers, turning on its head the logic suggesting that rents must be frozen to protect the homes of those fighting for France:

> Some small landlords are also mobilized soldiers. They counted on their rents to maintain their families during the war. A sergeant in the territorial army, who had built small apartments renting for four hundred francs, states that since he was called to the colors his wife and children have been completely destitute. The municipality has refused to aid them because they are property owners.

> The wife of a soldier, “who left courageously, like all the others,” writes us a letter in a style typical of the semiliterate: “I understand . . . that all must help the patrie to recover. But I believe, humble woman that I am, that our politicians should be aware that the small property owners have left their wives with few resources.”

As the voices quoted above demonstrate, images of women were key to discourses about the rent moratorium and about housing in general in wartime Paris. If the home front was a feminized space, then at its heart lay the home itself. The image of the wife, or even more so, of the war widow left without a home had tremendous power, not only because it reflected a very real dilemma for many Parisiennes but also because it encapsulated much of the anxiety about the war in general. Soldiers fought to protect their families and their nation, but if a soldier could not prevent his wife from losing their own home, he could hardly consider himself victorious, no matter what the outcome of battle. Moreover, this emphasis on the soldier trying to protect his family highlights the largely passive portrayal of women in discourses on wartime housing. The home might be a woman’s space, but it was a man’s job to pay the rent. Consequently, both landlords and tenants used the image of women to make the point that effective housing poli-

49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
cies really meant defending the masculinity of French soldiers, and of French men in general.\(^{51}\)

Not surprisingly, given the political orientation of _Le temps_, it generally represented the viewpoint of landlords much more extensively and eloquently than that of tenants. Nonetheless, it aired some of the grievances of the latter as well. Tenants who wrote in to defend the rent moratorium did so primarily in the name of patriotism and national sacrifice and almost always invoked the case of mobilized soldiers. From this point of view, a break on housing costs was something the nation (including landlords) owed to its soldiers. As one correspondent wrote, “On returning from war... the victorious soldier will have experienced the applause of a delirious people, received the homage that comes once in a century, marched under the Arch of Triumph; this man, who will be happy to rejoin his family and resume his civilian work, will have to think about paying his landlord!”\(^{52}\) Others argued that the rent moratorium was justified by the disruption of the national economy and the resultant joblessness of many Parisians at the outset of the war, noting that failing to suspend rent payments would have meant throwing innocent people into the street.\(^{53}\) Finally, some tenants’ defenders invoked the specter of the Commune: “Several correspondents remind us that the Commune of 1871 started with the rents question. Although such types of analysis are hardly acceptable, we have heard threats of revolution. One anonymous writer affirms that, if one must pay rent, one will see a _bonfire of the boots of Parisian landlords_. We regard such literary excesses as mere caprices, seeing them as an example of the sufferings of the people who write them.”\(^{54}\)

This discussion of landlords’ and tenants’ views in one leading newspaper gives one example of contrasting discourses on housing in wartime Paris. Sharply divided by who they believed was to blame for the situation, many landlords and tenants seemed at least to agree that it was bad, even desperate, and showed no signs of improving. How true was this? To what extent did images of tenants living in ease without paying rent, or of being forced into the street by cruel landlords, reflect life in Paris during the war? In the years before the war, housing in Paris did in fact improve in both quantity and quality, to a certain

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52 _Le temps_, Jan. 27, 1915.
53 _Le temps_, Feb. 19, 1915.
54 _Le temps_, Jan. 28, 1915.
extent catching up with the situation in London and other comparable cities. The low-rent housing stock used by working people registered a relative decline in the city of Paris, partly compensated for by the expansion of working-class suburbia. By 1914, therefore, the improvements in Parisian housing seemed to come at the expense of those who could least afford to pay the increasing rents.

The war of course intensified the shortage of low-cost housing in Paris. Housing construction immediately came to a standstill, so abruptly, in fact, that some buildings under construction in August 1914 remained partially built for the duration of the war. Initially the massive departures for the front and the panic of September that led many Parisians to quit the city produced a housing surplus. A special census taken that month counted the city’s population at 1.8 million, a full million less than in peacetime. Most of the departees left relatively affluent neighborhoods, so low-cost housing remained mostly full. Yet at least for the first year of the war, pressure on the city stock of apartments eased somewhat. Apartments valued between five and six hundred francs per year had a vacancy rate of 1.00 percent in 1914, rising to 3.75 percent by 1916. In 1916, however, this changed, leading to a serious housing shortage in the capital and its suburbs. Paris and especially the Paris area grew substantially during the war years, in part due to the greater concentration of war industries in the Department of the Seine. This brought about an influx of workers to the area as the nation struggled to find labor for its war effort. For the rest of the war years, in fact, for most of the early twentieth century, finding a place to live in Paris, especially an inexpensive one, became a daunting task.

The increased popularity of the *garni* indicated the intensity of the housing crisis. The use of furnished rooms, both in cheap hotels and in apartment buildings, became common in Paris shortly before the war in response to the decline of inexpensive apartments. Such rooms were small and dark (they usually had only one little window) and lacked bathrooms, running water, and heat. The number of Parisians living in them more than doubled between the end of 1914 and the end of 1918. Moreover, because the supply of residential buildings remained stagnant, overcrowding in these rooms increased, with many housing two or more individuals. Although they certainly existed in the city, the

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garnis proliferated most rapidly in the industrial suburbs of the Department of the Seine, especially in those that were home to major defense plants. The proportion of such rooms doubled in the suburbs between 1911 and 1921 and increased by about one-third in Paris itself. The garni had long been identified as a major threat to the public health. That Parisians availed themselves of such poor lodgings more frequently during the war underscores the depth of the housing crisis.

Housing crises usually consist of two primary aspects, shortages and rising rents. The two interact closely, with the former tending to produce the latter. Yet in the case of wartime housing in Paris, they operated discursively in different ways. Dominated by concerns about the rent moratoria, the public discussion of housing tended to focus on the issue of costs: landlords argued that the moratoria gave tenants free rent, tenants that rents still imposed a crushing burden on them. People devoted much less attention to the question of housing supply, except in the case of landlords who argued that the moratoria would produce an eventual disinvestment in Parisian residential housing, thus adversely affecting tenants in the future. In discussing who should pay for housing, it was easy to choose sides and blame one’s opponent, but the knottier question of how to increase the housing supply, especially in the absence of any solid public-sector initiatives, received much less attention.

One reason for this was that discussions of housing supply tended to undermine Manichaean views of the housing crisis, especially as far as tenants were concerned. Although the moratoria generally lumped the great majority of Parisian renters into a single category, in fact even working-class tenants experienced the moratoria in different ways. In particular, native or long-term residents of the area had a decided advantage over newcomers to the city. Native Parisians, especially men employed in the armaments industry, received relatively high salaries and could use the moratoria to stay in lodgings they had occupied before the war. Unless they wanted to move to another apartment, the housing shortage had little effect on them. In contrast, new arrivals from the provinces and from outside France had to seek shelter in furnished rooms and other inferior housing, often at higher rates. Benefiting little from the moratoria, they experienced the shortage of decent low-cost housing in full measure.

Men and women also lived the housing crisis differently. Women,

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especially those whose husbands were in uniform, moved more often than men. Although lawmakers designed the rent moratoria specifically to help war wives and widows, in the absence of a male breadwinner many women found it necessary to seek cheaper lodgings. Yet these became harder to find as the war went on. Consequently, for Parisian women, the wartime housing experience often meant a frenzied search for a new place to live, and getting used to a definite drop in the quality of one’s home once they found one. Although poor women of course suffered the most, many middle-class women with absent husbands also had to move to cheaper lodgings. The various wartime moratoria on rent certainly helped some women hang on to their homes, but they did little to aid those forced to search for new housing, especially if they were new to the Paris area.

In short, whereas the question of rents tended to underline the unity of all renters, the question of housing supply generally undermined that unity, exposing fissures along lines of class, geography, and gender. Not surprisingly, therefore, tenants’ movements during the war focused overwhelmingly on defending the moratoria against pressure by landlords and government officials, and less on the thornier question of creating more housing. Tenants’ organizations had come into existence in Paris shortly after the turn of the century. Before the war the Union Syndicale des Locataires had organized branches in most of the arrondissements of Paris, especially in the fifteenth and twenty-eighth, and was beginning to make inroads in suburbs like Clichy as well. Decidedly revolutionary, its members saw the fight against landlords as a crucial part of the class struggle and advocated actions like the déménagements à la cloche de bois, in which tenants moved out in the dead of night to avoid the confiscation of their furniture for nonpayment of rent.

The war years saw a proliferation of renters’ organizations in Paris. In September 1914 the Paris prefect of police noted their increase in the city: “On their side, renters are organizing resistance and in several arrondissements of Paris, especially in the fifteenth and twentieth, and was beginning to make inroads in suburbs like Clichy as well. Decidedly revolutionary, its members saw the fight against landlords as a crucial part of the class struggle and advocated actions like the déménagements à la cloche de bois, in which tenants moved out in the dead of night to avoid the confiscation of their furniture for nonpayment of rent.

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60 Ibid.
61 On rent control and housing, see Bertrand de Jouvenel, No Vacancies (New York, 1948); and Emile François Xavier Fender, La crise du bâtiment dans la région parisienne (Paris, 1935).
62 See the reports in Archives de la Préfecture de Police (hereafter APP), BA 1429; see also Susanna Magri, “Les locataires se syndiquent,” in Quillot and Guerrand, Cent ans d’habitat social, 98–107.
to be exonerated entirely from paying the rent that fell due during their absence.”

In July 1915 the Section Française de l’Internationale Ouvrière (the French Socialist Party) created a new organization, the Federal Union of Tenants (FUT), to spearhead the struggle for renters’ rights. In doing so, the socialists argued that tenants needed a more systematic strategy and movement to counteract the power of the landlords and therefore should rally around its new group. As an article in *L’humanité* put it:

Incontestably, what has made the defense of renters particularly difficult, both yesterday and today, has been their state of disorganization, the absence of any links between them, in the face of landlords whose demands and abuses, helped by powerful groups, increase from day to day. There was at one point an attempt at organization, but the noisy use of tenants’ unions by certain personalities deformed and distorted their character. The *déménagement à la cloche de bois* may be an expedient—not always without advantages for the landlord—it cannot serve as a weapon for all renters, or as a reliable defensive practice.

Here as on all other terrains, the weak need to organize themselves to counteract the power of the strong.\(^{64}\)

Such language, and the creation of the FUT in general, represented an attempt not only to increase the power of tenants but also to reshape renters’ activism along more orthodox Socialist Party lines. Prewar tenant unionism had had a strong neighborhood orientation and had been essentially independent of ties to political parties. In contrast, the new FUT was much more centralized and controlled by the Socialist Party and the Union des Syndicats de la Seine, the Confédération Générale du Travail’s regional organization for the Department of the Seine. Instead of taking direct action against landlords, it promoted pressure on government officials to improve life for renters. This model of consumer activism had both advantages and disadvantages. It gave tenants’ concerns greater weight in a context in which the state had intervened massively in relations between landlord and renter. At the same time, by making tenant unionism a branch of Socialist Party politics, the movement risked its ability to establish the broadest possible base.

The fact remains that during most of the war tenant activism operated from a position of strength. The FUT and other organizations stood foursquare behind the government’s rent moratoria, a policy that not

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\(^{64}\) *L’humanité*, Oct. 18, 1915.
only conformed to their own ideas but also benefited the overwhelming majority of Parisians. Until 1918 they pursued a dual strategy. On the one hand, they pressured government officials to renew the moratorium each time that rents came due. By 1916 the FUT had taken the position of demanding full exemption from rents for all tenants during the war. On the other hand, they tried to delay the enactment of a definitive law on rents until the end of the war. Socialist parliamentarians fought against pressure by landlords and conservatives to weaken the protection for tenants.65

With the passage of the renters’ law in March 1918, this second strategy came to an end. Parisian tenants’ organizations quickly attacked the law, especially its provisions allowing landlords to haul refractory tenants before the arbitration commissions. The FUT in particular went on the offensive, boycotting the commissions and increasing its efforts to organize renters. The transition to a more aggressive strategy after March 1918 took place in a context of increased consumer discontent, paving the way for the large consumer movements of 1919.

The Politics of Food in Wartime Paris

Food occupied an even more central place than housing in the consumers’ war. The biggest category of expenses in the budgets of working-class Parisians, indeed of most Parisians, food also exemplified the deteriorating quality of life for consumers in a city under siege. The very image of the besieged city traditionally carried with it ideas of starvation, and the people of Paris needed only look back to the siege of 1870 for a recent example.66 In comparison with those bitter days (or, for that matter, with the occupation years of the 1940s), the city was fortunate: Parisians managed to procure enough food to meet their needs. Yet although starvation on a significant scale did not reoccur, food prices rose sharply during the war, for some goods tripling between 1914 and 1917. Parisians also had to contend with shortages of many of their favorite foods, as well as of other consumer items like tobacco. While government officials did not immediately impose price controls as they did with housing, by the end of the war most major foodstuffs had come under public regulation. The study of food thus best illustrates the transition from the liberal to the interventionist state in consumer affairs.

Although food issues also mirrored and shaped discourses of

class in wartime Paris, they did so in a more complex way than the Manichaean struggle between landlords and tenants. To be sure, ideas of hoarding, illegitimate price-fixing, and starving the people did reappear during the war. At the same time, however, different foods came to symbolize virtue and vice, noble abstention versus iniquitous luxury, and loyalty to the national cause versus wanton selfishness. Moreover, as in the case of conflicts over housing, Parisians of different classes accused each other of overindulgence and neglect of the war effort. The classic image of the corpulent, cigar-smoking bourgeois was countered by the portrait of the overfed, wasteful war-industry worker. Discussions about food supplies and prices thus became sites of class conflict, frequently deployed in nationalist terms. Finally, discourses around food also shaped ideas of gender in wartime Paris. Women had the overwhelming responsibility for buying food and making the household budget stretch to fit the family’s needs. At the same time, the war brought the increased intervention of men, ranging from union activists to government officials, into the previously feminine world of the shopping basket.

In this section I focus on popular and official discourses around two central foodstuffs in wartime Paris, bread and meat. Before doing so, however, it makes sense to give an overview of provisioning in the French capital. As noted above, the outbreak of the war brought an immediate crisis of shortages, price rises, and hoarding to Parisian markets. This proved temporary: by the end of 1914, aided by a better-than-expected harvest, food supplies and prices had stabilized. Before long, however, problems manifested themselves in certain sectors. Starting in October 1914, sugar became scarce, partly because the large majority of French sugar refineries lay in occupied territory. As a result, the price of sugar had doubled by early 1915. For the rest of the war, straitened availability and high costs made sweetening one’s food a haphazard and luxurious enterprise. Milk and other dairy products also soon became scarce. In spite of extraordinary measures taken by public authorities, including converting Longchamps and other Paris racecourses to pastureland for transplanted provincial cows, milk was in short supply by the fall of 1915, and the prices of butter and cheese had risen sharply by 1916. Supplies of meat also proved inadequate, leading to regular price increases during the war.

In general, the price of food rose sharply throughout the war. By the end of 1915 increasing costs had become a matter of public concern, and Parisians began to employ the term *la vie chère* to characterize what

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seemed to be runaway inflation. Although statistics vary significantly, all agree on the same general outline. For example, Jean-Louis Robert notes that the general cost of living in Paris rose by over 200 percent during the war; other analyses suggest as much as 400 percent. Moreover, all indicate that prices rose most sharply in 1917, the year that saw the revival of strike activity and a general crisis of French morale both on the front lines and at home. In response, public authorities kept a close watch on public reactions to food-price increases, seeing them as a key to civilian support for the war effort. Parisians’ widespread grumbling over *la vie chère* did not have the same political consequences as in Russia or Germany. Nonetheless, remarks such as the following, recorded by a police agent in the Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, became relatively common in Paris by the end of the war:

> The housewives are complaining of the rise in the price of commodities, especially given the approach of the holidays. “It is becoming harder and harder to live,” they say, “these increases result not from the cold, or from the transportation crisis, but from middlemen and speculators, who engage in their illicit commerce while our elected officials worry about their political matters rather than dealing with the economic crisis, which is getting worse and worse.”

> A third woman declares: “One would believe that the government is looking for a revolution, because if you pull too hard on the rope, it will break one day. This would be unfortunate for us, because we have the best intentions and suffer in silence. If we no longer have the means to survive, then let them give us back our husbands, that’s all that we ask.”

For Parisians, especially working-class Parisians, feeding the city’s people was central to the war effort as a whole. Among specific commodities, bread was the great symbol of popular diets and the politics of food ever since the Revolution. Bread in wartime Paris presents a paradox. As noted above, public authorities quickly moved to regulate bread sales, long before those of any other foodstuffs. As a result, the price of bread hardly budged during the war. Supplies, of course, were another matter. Transportation problems, military requisitions, and labor shortages in bakeries combined

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70 APP, BA 1587, report of Dec. 23, 1917.
to produce a major shortfall in bread supplies during the war. Several factors, including the cold winter of 1916–17 and a shortage of farm laborers in the countryside, led to a notably poor wheat harvest in 1917. Bakers limited their hours, and Parisian shoppers had to get used to breadlines.\(^2\)

Bread shortages led inexorably to accusations of hoarding and speculation, and some Parisians found it tempting to blameavaricious peasants for popular hardships in the city. A March 1918 police report noted that “antagonism is increasing between urban and rural workers; the former reproach the latter for selling their goods at exaggerated prices.”\(^3\) Yet in general residents of the capital tended to direct their anger much more at the intermediaries and speculators than against those who actually grew the food they ate. Some asserted that the shortages were not real but were manufactured by those hoping to profit from the misery of the people. At the same time, bread itself became a symbol of social and economic difference. Not all breads were the same, and certainly they were not equal. By the early twentieth century Parisians had become accustomed to eating a wide variety of breads, ranging from the traditional black bread of the countryside to white flour loaves, not to mention pastries. This came to a halt with the beginning of the war as the French government imposed a ban on so-called pain de fantaisie, or “specialty breads.” Attempting to ensure adequate supplies of bread and to rein in price rises, public authorities decreed that only ordinary breads made largely of wheat flour should be sold.\(^4\)

The ban on specialty breads represented a kind of union sacrée of the bakery, a policy of equality among all consumers. This spirit of national unity in the bakeshop did not last long, however; by the end of 1914 reports indicated that bakers were again selling specialty breads to eager customers. The initial ban soon provoked numerous protests: in a resolution on November 8, 1914, the parliamentary deputies of the Department of the Seine voted to “express the regret that, for reasons that do not seem sufficient, the population of Paris and its suburbs


\(^3\) APP, BA 1639, “Bulletin confidential,” Mar. 15, 1918. Darrow has noted how many French city dwellers praised French peasant women for bringing in the “miracle harvest” of 1914 even though their men were at the front; failure to replicate this success in subsequent years contributed to a more negative view of rural dwellers, and of farm women in particular (*French Women and the First World War*, 178–86).

should be deprived of certain types of bread which it was used to buying at its bakeries.” In response, General Joseph Gallieni, head of the military garrison of Paris, defended the ban, arguing that the shortage of bakery workers due to wartime mobilization had forced the government to ban specialty breads so as to ensure adequate bread supplies for the population as a whole. Bakers themselves were divided on the question. While many attacked the ban as a violation of the liberty of commerce and of their customers’ rights as consumers, others (particularly representatives of small bakeries) defended it as a result of labor and material shortages. In July 1915 the Parisian bakeries syndicate voted to uphold the ban.

The government responded with a compromise, allowing bakers to sell specialty breads and pastries, but by weight rather than by unit price. This proposal pleased no one: those who opposed the sale of croissants and baguettes were not convinced that they would pose any less of a threat to bread supplies, while those who supported specialty baked goods did so largely because they were more profitable; under the new system that would not be so. There were numerous attempts to render the system of bread pricing suppler, but the question of specialty breads and pastries remained a contested one until finally national authorities once again banned their manufacture and sale outright in February 1917.

Can we then consider the issue of specialty breads an aspect of the attempt to enforce a union sacrée of the breadbasket, and of challenges to this attempt? Did the baguette and the croissant come to symbolize class conflict and a lack of commitment to the national war effort? Yes and no. Certainly, the desire for specialty baked goods was not limited to the wealthy: croissants and sweet breads, like cigarettes, represent the kind of small luxury that even those of modest incomes can indulge in, at least once in a while. At the same time, it was hard to avoid the conclusion that specialty breads went primarily to the well-off and that the ban on them in contrast forced them to sacrifice for the good of the nation at war. Even those who opposed the ban at times framed their argument in class terms. For example, Le petit Parisien, in attacking the idea of selling specialty bread by weight, argued that “specialty bread that you find in La Villette does not generally resemble that which you can obtain in rich neighborhoods. The bread they give you in poor establishments [bouillons à bas prix] is not like the more delicate breads

75 Le petit Parisien, Nov. 9, 1914.
76 Ibid.
77 Le petit Parisien, July 9, 1915.
78 Le petit Parisien, Feb. 20, 1917.
served in fine restaurants." As with other aspects of consumerism in wartime Paris, debates over types of breads expressed at times both consumer unity and class divisions.

Meat exemplified these conflicts more sharply. Like other foods, it came to symbolize the inequality of supply and lack during the war. Margaret H. Darrow has shown how middle-class consumers viewed chicken as a symbol of working-class luxury, blaming overpaid munitions workers for the high price of food in general. In response, unions and socialists emphasized the difficulties of working-class families trying to feed their families. In July 1915, for example, *L’humanité* discussed the heavy burden of meat expenses on workers in Paris: “They have limited the price of bread, because it is considered an indispensable foodstuff. But isn’t meat just as indispensable, especially in large urban areas?” Such observations were not limited to the political Left. An October 1915 article in *Le petit Parisien* followed a working-class housewife into the market as she tried to buy food for her husband and three children on his meager salary of forty francs a week. It showed how she was forced to turn down one type of meat after another as too expensive: “Well then! No fish, no chicken, no rabbit, no roast of veal, no stew! All the same, one must eat meat from time to time, murmured the housewife—because they are starting to murmur in the marketplace. But her discontent stops there and, like last Sunday, she falls back on a *pot-au-feu*. ‘It’s the best bargain,’ the butcher confides to her.” At the same time, working-class opinion tended to blame the traditional bogeymen of high food prices, rapacious butchers and food speculators.

This discourse of conflict surrounded one of the most innovative attempts to lower meat prices, the decision to import frozen beef. As the extent of the war effort and its impact on the Paris food market became clear by the end of 1914, public authorities began to explore ways to increase meat supplies and thereby lower the cost to the consumer. One project concerned importing beef from the French colony of Madagascar; some suggested bringing Malagasy cows to France to replenish local herds. By early 1915 both national and municipal officials had begun to focus on trying to get Parisian consumers to eat frozen beef. A small amount of frozen meat had already been introduced into France before the war, especially mutton, but most French consumers

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81 *L’humanité*, July 1, 1915.
83 *L’humanité*, May 6, 1915; *L’humanité*, May 13, 1915. One French letter writer suggested that when Malagasy natives slaughtered cattle for their hides, the leftover beef could be sent to France.
were still used to eating freshly slaughtered beef from local cows. In deciding to import more frozen beef, principally from South America, the government focused less on the needs of Parisian consumers than on those of frontline soldiers. In May 1915 the Chamber of Deputies voted to authorize the War Ministry to begin importing frozen meat from France’s colonies and from overseas to feed the troops. This initiative soon led to proposals to introduce \textit{le frigo} into civilian meat markets and butcher shops; after all, if it was good enough for France’s fighting men, it ought to be good enough for those they defended. As the nation’s largest center of beef consumption, as well as the place where consumers complained most loudly about the high price of meat, Paris was chosen as the place to introduce frozen meat.\footnote{\textit{“Viande fraîche et viande frigorifiée,” \textit{Le petit Parisien}, May 31, 1915; \textit{“Aux Halles, fut vendue, hier, la première viande frigorifiée; ce fut un succès . . . .” \textit{Le petit Parisien}, Aug. 8, 1915; \textit{“Les conditions de l’importation des viandes frigorifiées en France,” \textit{L’humanité}, July 16, 1915; \textit{“La cherté de la viande constitue un problème des plus graves,” \textit{L’humanité}, July 1, 1915.}}}

In bringing mass amounts of frozen beef to Parisian consumers, French authorities had to cope with a number of difficulties, technological and otherwise. Relatively few butchers in Paris had the freezer boxes or cellars equipped to handle and preserve frozen meat. More generally, well before the era of electric refrigeration in private homes, many Parisian consumers regarded with suspicion the very idea of frozen meat, fearing that it might be spoiled. Some Parisians also disliked frozen meat out of patriotism. Frozen beef was perforce foreign beef, and some consumers simply felt that French meat must taste better. Luise Deletang, a seamstress in the fifth arrondissement, noted in her wartime journal her strong preference for “good French beef”: “A municipal butcher shop opened on the corner, and they sell frozen meat there, half price. . . . You won’t see me there. . . . it may be stupid, but it disgusts me, the idea that these beasts are killed a year or more ago, I would rather not eat meat at all. I’ve never found anything wrong with French livestock, and I won’t help enrich the Argentines!”\footnote{Louise Deletang, \textit{Journal d’une ouvrière parisienne pendant la guerre} (Paris, 1935), 465, entry of Mar. 16, 1919.} The issue of transportation also got mixed up with xenophobia. At the time, only Britain possessed a significant number of ships outfitted for the transport of frozen foodstuffs. Yet the French government required frozen meat to be transported to France in French ships, which prompted \textit{L’humanité} to note that this would simply increase the price of meat once it finally got to Paris.\footnote{\textit{L’humanité}, July 16, 1915; \textit{Le petit Parisien}, May 31, 1915.}

In spite of these difficulties, Parisian butcher shops did begin to sell frozen beef in significant quantities by the late summer of 1915.
The political Left in particular embraced *le frigo* as a way of making meat affordable for working-class families. Consumer cooperatives, very much a part of working-class political life in the early twentieth century, took the lead in promoting frozen meat, arguing for its healthful qualities and instructing housewives how best to prepare it. An October 1915 article in *L’humanité* trumpeted some of the first sales of frozen meat in Paris as a salvation for housewives and a victory for the working class in general. Throughout 1916 the working-class press ran a series of articles touting the benefits of frozen beef. It did so with the full support of public authorities, who hoped that these erstwhile revolutionaries would help overcome popular resistance in general to this new type of food and in the bargain remove meat prices as a source of working-class discontent.

Yet while the Left’s support of frozen meat may have helped convince some Parisians to try beef from South America, it did not necessarily depoliticize the issue. On the contrary, labor’s backing was intimately tied to oppositional political discourses. These took two primary forms. The first depicted opponents of frozen meat as lazy, wasteful bourgeois, too concerned with creature comforts to bother about the welfare of the people or the nation as a whole. Drawing on traditional stereotypes of corpulent plutocrats, it paralleled popular middle-class images of the overfed war worker. The second form, in the best traditions of moral economy, attacked speculators, intermediaries, and sometimes the butchers themselves for resisting the sale of frozen meat. As an article in *L’humanité* argued:

> French consumers are beginning to understand that those who tell them that frozen meat is nothing but carrion are making fools of them. The sacred battalion of routine and of exploitation is composed of the majority of retail butchers, of the Halles brokers [mandataires], and especially of the meat wholesalers at La Villette. The first are opposed to frozen meat by habit, by stupidity, and by their frequent desire to insult their “dirty” clients. The brokers and meat wholesalers, because frozen meat means freezers, and freezers rationally used would prevent them from speculating, from letting meat rot while consumers fret, thus abusing the honesty of both meat producers and consumers.

The struggle to ensure the acceptance of frozen beef and thus to lower meat costs was not so much a question of correcting popular prejudices...
as it was of fighting the attempts of the bourgeois and the speculator to starve the people.

The political and popular discourses around bread and meat in wartime Paris give a nuanced portrait of the union sacrée. Both the ban on specialty breads and the promotion of frozen meat represented an attempt to forge a national consensus from below by limiting luxury food consumption and making workers’ diets the standard of wartime unity. Therefore they did not oppose the idea of united opposition to the Germans so much as recast it: in these readings working people became the true symbol of embattled France. In particular, working-class women, embodied in the figure of the housewife seeking to feed her family, appeared as the heroines of the marketplace. Yet unlike the traditional narrative of the union sacrée, consumers frequently located the enemy at home, not on the other side of the trenches. For middle-class consumers, highly paid workers in war plants represented not only an unwelcome inversion of class hierarchies but also a luxurious standard of living unseemly for a nation at war. For working people, speculators, rapacious shopkeepers, and the wealthy in general placed profits above the people, selfish desires above the national interest. By 1915, therefore, the versus habit had invaded the city’s food markets, and the search for dinner had developed into a consumers’ war.

The concept of the consumers’ war in wartime Paris operated on several different levels. Most obviously it worked as a metaphor: Parisians could view their struggles to obtain basic consumer goods as analogous to the combat of frontline soldiers, indeed to the nation’s very fight for survival. The concept also reframed class conflict, so that commodities became symbols of social differences and divisions. In addition, the consumers’ war gave an alternate view of the union sacrée. It suggested that for many working-class Parisians national unity was achieved by excluding the wealthy, not by joining them. It implied that the enemy was at home as well as abroad; the role reserved in official discourse for spies and traitors was here extended to speculators, dishonest shopkeepers, and sometimes the bourgeoisie as a whole. It showed how the official union sacrée did not abolish class conflict but rather forced it into alternate channels shaped by preindustrial traditions, channels usually gendered female. Until the spring of 1917, at least, this consumerist class conflict did not translate into widespread opposition to the war. Rather, it suggested that the fight for victory, in the most radical traditions of the French Revolution, must be waged on several fronts at once.

This consideration of the micropolitics of consumer behavior offers us a glimpse into how Parisians experienced World War I on
a day-to-day basis, and how they made sense of this conflict. It also shows how a society negotiated major social distinctions to mount a massive war effort, and how those attempts at unity sometimes foun-
dered or were at least interpreted differently by different types of Paris-
sians. In addition, it suggests that consumerism remained an issue of important political significance well into the twentieth century, blend-
ing early modern notions of moral economy with modern techniques of state mobilization. Although Parisian consumer discontent did not have the dramatic impact it did in Russia, where a women’s bread riot in 1917 sparked the Russian Revolution, it did loom as a major cause of concern for the French state and for leaders of society in general. Ultimately, victory in the struggle against Germany depended at least in part on a successful resolution of the consumers’ war.