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‘International food aid relief and the urban/rural divide in nutritional status in the First Austrian Republic, 1919-21’

When the Austrian-Hungarian Empire finally collapsed in the fall of 1918, people were exhausted, and leaders on all sides were suing for peace. Vienna in particular was filled with hungry and deprived citizens. Hungary, once the breadbasket of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, had stopped transport of grains to the Austrian half of the empire early in the War. Internal trade disruptions were only exasperated by the Allied blockade.

After WW1, Vienna served as the headquarters for aid organisations throughout the new republic, supporting branch offices throughout the country. The American Relief Administration (ARA), the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), and the Swedish Red Cross were some of the largest foreign groups operating in Austria that provided foreign foodstuffs. All worked closely with the government and institutions in the country in their efforts to feed hungry people, particularly children.

There were many children in need of food in Vienna. A study done by municipal leaders in 1919 stated that over 90% of Viennese school children were suffering from malnourishment. By 1921, over 70% of all school children in Vienna between the ages of six to fourteen were served a daily meal from international food aid. Operations also existed in cities outside of the capital city, particularly in Linz and Graz. Although international food aid also made its way to smaller, more rural parts of the country such as Bruck an der Mur in Styria and parts of Tyrol, it was generally assumed that rural children would have greater access to foodstuffs than children in larger cities.

This paper examines the inequalities that existed in the lives of children in the first years of the First Austrian Republic, from 1919 – 1921, by analysing and assessing their nutritional status. In the short run, was it better to live in the countryside, with perhaps less access to foreign aid but nearer to the local food supply, or was it better to live in the city where fresh farm produce was assumed to be scarcer, but immediate access to foreign charity was greater?