

Western Europe's last food riots: a comparison of the market riots of the 1840's and 1850's in Flanders

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Introduction

The end of the 'classic food riot' in Western Europe is situated in the 40's and 50's of the nineteenth century. Food riots later recurred in war circumstances, but real years of dearth and the collective violence that often coincided with them, were so to say no longer seen after the middle of the nineteenth century. Flanders followed this pattern as well. Steep price rises in the 1840's and 1850's coincided with a rise in criminality and a wave of food riots. Afterwards, the phenomenon seems to have disappeared.

Since historians started investigating the phenomenon of collective violence and food riots, mainly since the 1970's, they came to a reappraisal of this form of resistance. Before, food riots were often seen as merely an 'automated' response to high food prices. Today they recognise that the occurrence of this form of disturbance requires more explanation. They are not so much a response to hunger or high prices, as they are a complex form of protest. The aim of rioters is to persuade the government to take action, or to take matters into their own hands.

In this paper, I will investigate Oudenaarde and Sint-Niklaas, two small towns in the Belgian province East-Flanders. Both faced food riots in this period. Both towns differed in several respects, which makes a comparative study possible, more so, because also the causes for dearth differed considerably between the 1840's and 1850's. How did food riots manifest themselves in these towns? Do these 'last' riots fit within the existing patterns set out by historiography?

The last food riots

In several Western European countries, food riots mainly occurred in the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century. They are considered to be symptomatic of the transition from the locally oriented survival economy of the Ancien Regime to a 'modern, national, free market economy' (Thompson 1991: 293-294). According to Tilly (1971: 25; 1983: 335), who investigated food riots in France, two developments lay at the basis of the more frequent occurrence of food riots: the greater scale on which the grain trade took place, and the changing attitude of the government towards trade. In the eighteenth century in France, ever more grain circulated. The number of tradesmen involved in storing grain and transporting it over large distances increased. The government was ever less inclined to put limits on the liberties of these tradesmen, in view of the larger tax revenues the grain trade would produce.

The dearth of the 1840's and 1850's corresponds with a last great 'wave' of food riots across Western Europe. Afterwards, the phenomenon seems to have disappeared, only to recur in wartime. The disappearance of the food riot is attributed to such developments as a more efficient market and declining underemployment on the countryside (by increased employment opportunities in urban industry or services). New channels through which discontent could be vented – labour unions – emerged, while political participation became a possibility for a larger segment of the population. Protest against dearth was henceforth less directed against high prices, but rather formulated in terms of wage demands. Gradually, a system of social security was organised (Thompson 1971: 129; Tilly 1971: 24; Tilly 1983: 346-348).

Research into food riots in the Southern Netherlands and Belgium is rather rare (Jacobs 1993; Van Honacker 1994). With the exception of a number of local case studies, Deneckere (1997: 77-129) is at this moment the only one who has tried to give a general overview of food-related discontent in the 1840's and 1850's. She investigated a number of large cities: Ghent, Antwerp, Brussels and Liege. Her research results confirm the linear pattern sketched out by Tilly. In 1847, Deneckere sees a 'wave of food riots' taking place, which according to her, were part of the old repertoire of collective action. Yet, she also found new things in the 1840's, such as the failed hunger marches of 1845 and 1846. The 1850's, on the other hand, were characterised by 'hybrid mixtures' of old and new forms of protest against dearth. In the 1850's, she doesn't see a wave of food riots taking place as in 1847. In Ghent in 1853 and 1854, things remained 'remarkably

calm'. New forms of action emerged, such as petitions and marches. After the 1850's, food riots would become exceptional, whereas strikes for higher wages were ever more frequent (Deneckere 1997: 119-124). My aim for this paper is to compare the collective violence over food of the 1840's and 1850's with the model of the classic food riot. Firstly, I want to gain more detailed knowledge on the collective violence that took place in Oudenaarde and Sint-Niklaas in both decades under study. What exactly happened in these towns, under what circumstances?

Secondly, I will look at differences within the period and towns under study. Do the different circumstances in both towns and both decades lead to different outcomes in terms of collective violence? If this appears to be the case, what does this tell us about the motivations and actions of rioters?

A third question we must ask is how the changed circumstances within which the 'last food riots' occurred influenced what happened? The model of the classic food riot is essentially based on eighteenth century examples. How were food riots in the middle of the nineteenth century shaped by the changed administrative, social and economic environment? Can the model of the classic food riot be applied in such an environment?

The food riots of Oudenaarde and Sint-Niklaas are well described. For both towns, newspaper accounts and official reports are available. For Sint-Niklaas, there is also the account of an anonymous chronicler.

This paper is structured as follows. I will begin by describing what is meant with 'the model of the classic food riot'. After that, the causes and context of the crises of the 1840's and 1850's will be given. Then, an analysis will be made of the collective violence over food that took place in both decades, first in Oudenaarde and Sint-Niklaas in particular, and then in Flanders in general. I will end by focusing on some aspects of food riots that, according to me, are new in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The model of the classic food riot

The image of the 'classic food riot' is mostly the result of the groundbreaking research done by Thompson (1971) on food riots in England and Tilly (1971) on France. I will refer to their work as the 'model of the classic food riot'.

Firstly, in what circumstances do food riots break out, according to the model? Although Thompson (1971) was not the first one to say this, he gave an important impulse to the research on food riots by exposing they weren't simply a blind response of a hungry crowd to high prices. A large part of the population expected the government not to allow certain commercial practices that were considered to cause dearth and thus to be unfair. Among such practices were the activities of tradesmen visiting provincial markets to buy large quantities of grain at high prices, or directly at the homes of farmers, as a result of which farmers brought less supplies to local markets. If in times of dearth such actions were not curtailed, the crowd believed they could take matters into their own hands. Food riots should therefore be seen as an attempt of the crowd to impose order. Thompson calls the set of convictions that legitimised these actions 'the moral economy of the poor'. With food riots, the population executed itself what it expected the government to do: controlling grain supplies, putting limits on export, imposing maximum prices, etc. In doing so, the crowd selectively reconstructs the policy pursued by the government in earlier years of dearth.

Particularly Tilly (1971: 46-47) has stressed that food riots in France were a response to an increasingly absent government: "[a]s the government withdrew, the people [...] rose to act in its place, or to force it to act." As such, food riots became an important element of political conflict, with on the one hand the people expecting the authorities to intervene, and on the other hand, a government ever more influenced by physiocratic and free-trade ideas. Walter and Wrightson (1976) explained how, when the expected measures were indeed taken, dearth could contribute to the preservation of social stability. Intervention in that case confirmed "the complex of relationships between individuals and groups occupying different positions in the hierarchy of wealth and power." (Walter and Wrightson 1976: 22-23). But even then, riots could still occur, when dearth was not "*seen* to be met by action on the part of the authorities." (original emphasis, Walter and Wrightson 1976: 41). For example, grain transports could be targeted at times export was illegal. In such cases, instead of being motivated by the *absence* of governmental orders, popular actions could derive sanction precisely from such orders (Walter and Wrightson 1976: 33-34).

Secondly, when food riots break out, what form do they take? Among the repertoire of food riots are such phenomena as the 'market riot', an urban form of food riots, aimed at bakers or tradesmen; the *entrave*, the interruption of grain transports, occurring more on the countryside; and finally *taxation populaire*, when the price of goods was imposed by the crowd (Tilly 1971: 23). What is remarkable, is the discipline with which these actions took place. During *taxation populaire*, for example, food was sold at a price imposed by the crowd, after which the revenues were handed over to the owners. Food was seldom stolen, rather it was symbolically destroyed to punish or humiliate the owner. Women often played an important part in food riots. According to Thompson, rioters usually had the sympathy of broader strata of the population. They often attempted to gain legitimacy by the participation of a member of the local government (Thompson 1971: 98, 107-115).

Bohstedt (1992) warns against a too hasty usage of the concept 'moral economy', and to see all food riots as a manifestation of that moral economy. According to him, the idea that the state should intervene in the economy, when it came to food, was no reason for the crowd to take action. If the behaviour of the crowd would seem to suggest such convictions, then it is rather because such behaviour had proved successful in the past. Food riots are not 'anti-capitalist protest' in accordance with the ideal of a 'paternalist economy'. Food riots "were more morally autonomous and strategically adaptable, less bound by tradition" (Bohstedt 1992: 270-271). There should therefore be more attention for the diversity of forms riots could take, instead of seeing all cases as the expression of the same set of convictions. Riots are for Bohstedt a pragmatic answer to immediate needs, influenced by the local circumstances within which they take place. These local circumstances determine the shape of food riots, if these circumstances make food riots possible in the first place. It is equally important to be able to explain why riots take place in one place, and not in another (Bohstedt 1992: 274-275).

Causes of scarcity and dearth in the 1840's and 1850's

Even though rising prices are not enough to explain the outbreak of food riots, they often coincide. The 1840's and 1850's were no exception to this. Both decades saw years of high food prices, but for very different reasons.

The immediate cause of the food crisis of the 1840's was the potato blight, which first struck in 1845, and the failure of the rye harvest in 1846. Graph 1 shows the land productivity in East-Flanders of wheat, rye and potatoes for the period 1845-1860. The drop of 1845 and 1846 is clearly visible. When potatoes were hit in 1845 by the *phytophthora infestans*, a fungus imported from America, the effects were disastrous. In both East- and West-Flanders, crop losses were more than 90%. Moreover, that year more potatoes than usually were planted to compensate the meagre harvest of wheat and coleseed, that had suffered from the severe winter of 1844-45. The following years, the blight kept attacking. With the exception of 1849, only around the middle of the 1850's were 'normal' potato harvests reached again. In 1846, the failed potato harvest was accompanied by a failed rye harvest. The grain had suffered from the bad weather of that year, although the loss of wheat and other grains was still rather modest. The serious diminution of those harvests that produced the basic foodstuffs of the population, caused a real threat of famine (Vanhaute 2007: 130-131).

The government responded with a diversity of measures, such as prohibiting export of foodstuffs, purchasing food abroad, financial support for local authorities and subsidising public works (Delfosse 1983: 22-24; Vanhaute 2007: 138). Despite these measures, the effects of a failed harvest on prices were soon visible. Price rises after the harvest of 1845 were still limited, as Graph 2 shows. The loss of the potato harvest caused prices to double on the markets of Oudenaarde and Sint-Niklaas. Grain prices were clearly influenced. The price rises of 1847 were of a different nature. Prices of grain and potatoes show an almost continuous rise throughout the winter and spring of 1847, reaching a peak around May-June 1847. At that point, wheat was sold at about 40 fr. per hl. When the successful harvest of 1847 was brought to the markets, prices quickly dropped back (Vanhaute 2007: 131).

The crisis of the 1840's was more than a harvest failure, however. The linen industry, an important source of income for many rural households, could no longer compete with England's modern industrial production. Many families on the Flemish countryside were engaged in spinning and weaving flax, as part-time or full-time activity, to supplement the meagre incomes of their small plots. The linen they produced had until

then been sold on international markets, who were now flooded by English products. In Flanders, the raw material, flax, was expensive because of export, whereas prices of the finished product, and thus revenues, dropped.

The crisis in the linen industry and the harvest failure came at a time when the Flemish rural economy had reached its limits. Families on the Flemish countryside needed to make a living on ever smaller farms. Moreover, an ever larger proportion of farmland was leased, for which ever increasing lease prices needed to be paid. This increasing fragmentation of farms was partly made possible by the introduction of the potato, which could feed more people on the same area, compared to grain. Next to that, Flemish agriculture was renowned for its impressive productivity, which however, came at the cost of a high labour input. Despite all those efforts, many families needed to seek out additional incomes. Many lived at the edge of poverty. When in 1845 and 1846 harvests failed, they were easily pushed over that edge (Thoen and Vanhaute 1999; Vanhaute 2001; Vanhaute 2007).

While the 1840's meant a deep crisis for the Flemish rural economy, in the 1850's the problems were mostly limited to dearth. The causes of that dearth were of an entirely different nature than in the previous decade. According to Delfosse (1990: 71), the harvests between 1853 and 1856 in Belgium were only meagre. Particularly below expectations were those of 1853 and 1855. Graph 1 shows that in East-Flanders the wheat harvest of 1853 fell short, and that in 1855 the grain harvest in general was not excellent. Still, the 1850's do not appear to be particularly bad harvest years. The potato harvests reached 'normal' levels again in the middle of that decade, whereas the wheat- and rye harvest of 1854 was the best in the whole period under consideration.

It was rather the international situation that strongly contributed to dearth. In France, the harvest of 1853 would have been far below expectations, according to Horii (1984: 375-377). He believes the shortage was even comparable with that of 1846. In response, France had to rely heavily on imports, which however were restrained because of the Crimean War. One of the results of this conflict, waged from 1854 until 1856 between Turkey, with the help of Great-Britain and France, and Russia, was that the Baltic and Black Sea Ports could no longer supply Western Europe with Russian grain.

Belgium was in the middle of the nineteenth century no longer a net exporter, but importer (Vanhaute 2007: 126). Throughout the nineteenth century, Belgium had to rely more and more on food imports to feed its growing population. In the 1850's, that import, despite the international situation, was not small, on the contrary. However, the price at which grain was imported, was particularly high: about 31 fr. per hl. for wheat and 22 fr. per hl for rye (Degrève 1982: 304, 309)¹.

While there was considerable consensus on measures to be taken to alleviate the crisis in the 1840's, they were cause for great dispute in the 1850's. Just as in the 1840's free import and prohibited export of certain foodstuffs was declared. Quickly, in August 1853 the import of several products was declared free, but there was long hesitation to prohibit export. Export of potatoes was forbidden in October 1853, but an export prohibition of grain came only a year later, end November 1854. The temporary laws that imposed this customs regime were prolonged, until the 'definitive' law of February 1857. That law instituted low import duties for grain, meat and animals, among other things, and all of that could be freely exported (Delfosse 1983: 22-24; Delfosse 1990: 73-74).

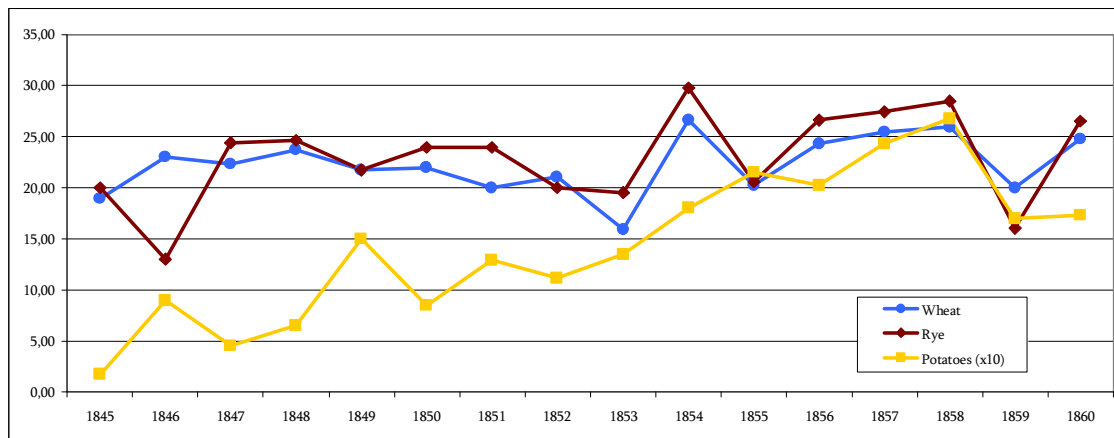
The prices on the markets of Oudenaarde and Sint-Niklaas in the 1850's show a very different pattern than in the 1840's (see Graph 2). Potato prices increased only slightly. Grain prices were considerably higher, although at no time the peak reached in 1847 was surpassed. The difference is mainly that dearth in the 1850's was continuous. The price of wheat was above 30 fr. per hl. for almost the entire period. Rye seldom dropped below 20 fr. per hl.

If we look at average prices per harvest year (Graph 3), it becomes clear that the 1850's, more than the 1840's, were years of dearth. Although the maximum prices of 1847 were considerably higher than those of the 1850's, the average prices for both decades are at about the same level. The crisis of the 1840's however, was more than a period of dearth, and its impact was considerably greater. The demographic development of East-Flanders between 1841 and 1860 clearly shows this (Graph 4). From 1846 until 1849 the number of deaths exceeded birth in the province. More deaths were not only the result of malnourishment, but also of

¹ Prices given by Degève in fr. per 100 kg., recalculated at 78 kg. per hl. for wheat and 71 kg. per hl. for rye

epidemic diseases (typhus and cholera) that plagued the weakened population. The impact of the 1850's crisis is visible in the graph, but clearly not as great.

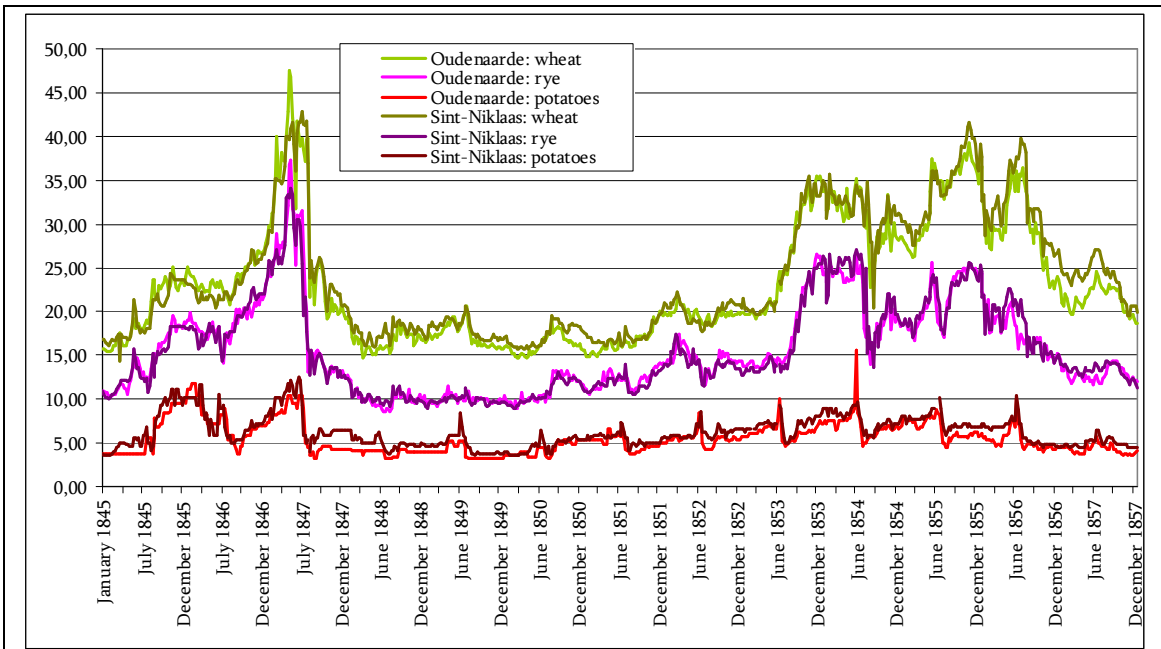
Graph 1. Average land productivity of wheat, rye and potatoes (in hl. per ha), East-Flanders, 1845-1860²



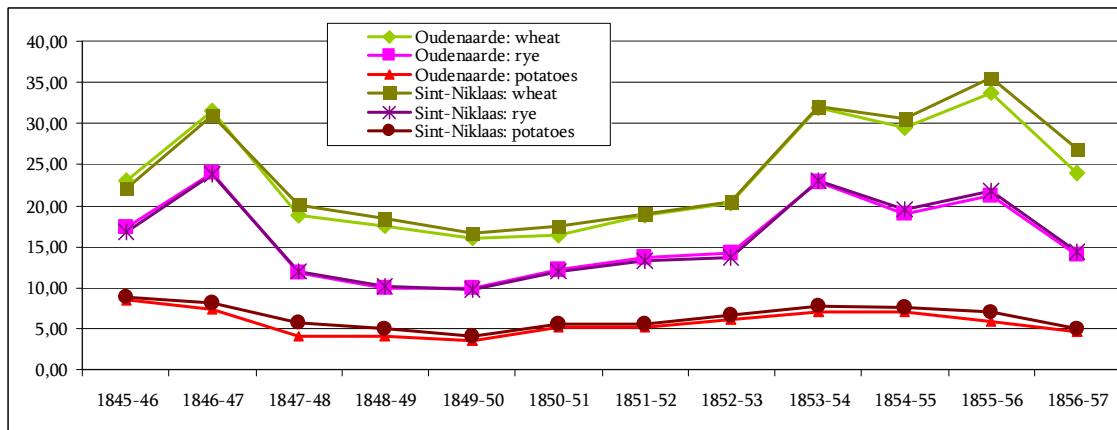
Graph 2. Average weekly prices of wheat, rye and potatoes on the markets of Oudenaarde and Sint-Niklaas, in fr. per hl., 1845-1857³

² Data from the *Bulletin du Conseil supérieur de l'agriculture*, 1845-1860. No data available before 1845. Figures from the summarising national overview, except for 1845, data for that year taken from the provincial overview of East-Flanders. Land productivity of potatoes is sometimes given in kg., in which case this was recalculated at 67 kg. per hl. Data for potatoes in 1848 taken from: RABe, Provincie Oost-Vlaanderen, 0/1173/5

³ Unweighed mean of the prices of white and red wheat, rye and potatoes, as weekly noted in the price register of Oudenaarde and Sint-Niklaas: SAO, Modern Archief, OUD 744.2-44: Mercurialen (1844 - 1846); OUD 744.2-46: Mercurialen (1846 - 1848); OUD 744.2-49: Mercurialen (1848 - 1850); OUD 744.2-50: Mercurialen (1850 - 1853); OUD 744.2-52: Mercurialen (1853 - 1855); OUD 744.2-53: Mercurialen (1855 - 1858); SASN, Modern Archief, 4716: Register van mercurialen (1839-1853); 4717: Register van mercurialen (1854-1864)



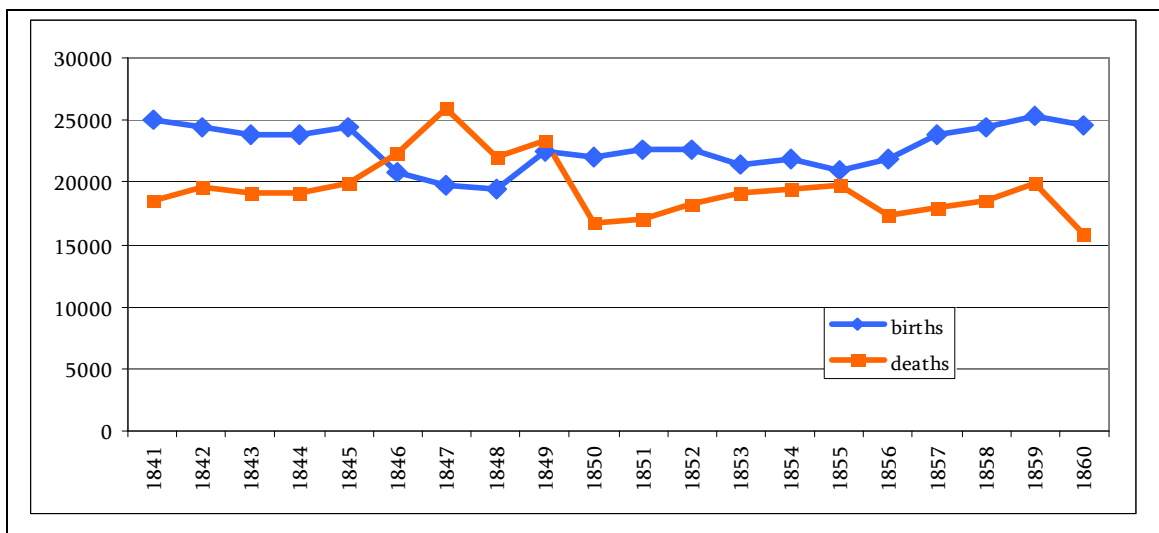
Graph 3. Average prices per harvest year of wheat, rye and potatoes on the markets of Oudenaarde and Sint-Niklaas, in fr. per hl., 1845-1857⁴



Graph 4. Births and death in East-Flanders, 1841-1860⁵

⁴ Unweighed mean of the prices of white and red wheat, rye, potatoes, per harvest year (August-September), as weekly noted in the price register of Oudenaarde and Sint-Niklaas: SAO, Modern Archief, OUD 744.2-44: Mercurialen (1844 - 1846); OUD 744.2-46: Mercurialen (1846 - 1848); OUD 744.2-49: Mercurialen (1848 - 1850); OUD 744.2-50: Mercurialen (1850 - 1853); OUD 744.2-52: Mercurialen (1853 - 1855); OUD 744.2-53: Mercurialen (1855 - 1858); SASN, Modern Archief, 4716: Register van mercurialen (1839-1853); 4717: Register van mercurialen (1854-1864)

⁵ *Exposé de la situation du royaume*, 1841-1850: Titre II, p. 21, 27; *Exposé de la situation du royaume*, 1851-1860: Titre II, p. 21, 27



Food riots in Oudenaarde and Sint-Niklaas in the 1840's and 1850's

Sint-Niklaas was in the middle of the nineteenth century a small industrial town with more than 20.000 inhabitants. Braet (1953), who studied the social composition of East-Flemish provincial towns, distinguishes in the industrial census of 1846 more than 50 companies with an industrial character, where more than 1.200 people were employed. Several new factories were erected throughout the 1850's. The poorest segment of the town's population, those who did not pay taxes (39% of the population), consisted for more than half of factory proletariat (22%), the others (17%) were artisanal workers (Braet 1953: 128-130, 141). This labouring population was already early organised in mutual support funds. In 1842 there were nine such organisations with in total 1.365 members (Braet 1953: 254-256). In the middle of the 1850's the number of members had gone up to more than 2.450 men and women⁶.

Oudenaarde was an even smaller town with no more than 6.000 inhabitants. Contrary to Sint-Niklaas, there was hardly any sign of modern industry. About 500 people were employed in local secondary companies producing for local needs. The poorest part of the population (45% of inhabitants) consisted of families living from artisanal activities. Contrary to a factory proletariat, these people, according to Braet, could always easily find employment and were much less exposed to economic crises (Braet 1953: 94-95, 141).

In what way was public tranquility in Oudenaarde and Sint-Niklaas disturbed by collective violence over food in the 1840 and 1850? Does the shape of that violence conform to the image of the classic food riot?

Oudenaarde: bread riots in 1847, market riots in 1854

During the crisis years of the 1840's, numerous small cases of individual theft were signalled in Oudenaarde (Ronsijn 2004: 250-252). One evening however, public tranquillity was disturbed by graver events. On Wednesday May 12, two large thefts of bread occurred⁷. Around 10 o'clock in the evening, a group of 150 to 200 people gathered in front of a bakery. Some of them broke in and took 20 to 25 breads. In another bakery, 120 to 130 breads were stolen, possibly by the same looters. They also took a silver watch and inflicted considerable damage. Unfortunately, more about the exact circumstances of these bread riots is not known.

Food riots recurred in the 1850's. On September 7 1854, Oudenaarde's weekly market on Thursday was the scene of riots⁸. Several days before, it had already become apparent that the population was influenced by

⁶ KBR, Krantencollectie: JB340: Gazette van het Land van Waes, 12.03.1854, 13th year, N° 11, p. 2, 1st column

⁷ SAO, Microfilm B80: Gazette van Audenaerde: 16.05.1847, 13th year, N° 20, p. 3, 1st column

⁸ Described by Ronsijn, W. (2005). "Marktbevoorrading, hongeroproer en overheidstussenkomst in Oudenaarde, 1842 - 1856." *Handelingen van de Geschied- en Oudheidkundige Kring van Oudenaarde* 52 (boekdeel 2): 155-210. p. 171-173, based on: SAO, Modern Archief, OUD 744.2-5: Graanmarkt te Oudenaarde (1811-1876): Original of letter (Oudenaarde,

the example of market riots in other cities. Wednesday evening, before the weekly market on Thursday, there was a dispute in a tavern between some townspeople and an engrosser of butter and eggs. The mayor was informed, and he took measures for the next day.

On Thursday, Already before the grain market became accessible for tradesmen, groups of people formed around 'instigators'. They were agitating each other against grain merchants, who were accused of visiting farm homes and thus driving up prices. At 12 o'clock, there was a mass of women on the market who were 'very embittered', together with children. At that time, tradesmen were allowed into the market.

At that moment the disturbances began. Some persons went through the market in search for tradesmen, who were threatened to leave. According to the report of the mayor, at least four persons were subject of such a 'treatment'. One tradesman was beaten. Another, when he wanted to leave town at 2 o'clock, was chased by a mass of street children. When those children started collecting rocks to throw at him, the police intervened, who could safely guide the tradesman into the neighbouring village Bevere. Also a notary from Kruishoutem, who wanted to buy one or two hl. of grain, was chased.

The authorities didn't allow things to get any more out of hand than that. When the police appeared on the scene, it was respected. In the end, all what happened was some shouting and threatening; great 'excesses' didn't occur. According to the local newspaper, calm returned when tradesmen were driven out of the market, and the grain was sold 'at its price'.

Sint-Niklaas: looting in 1853, market riots in 1854

In Sint-Niklaas between 1845 and 1860, there were two outbursts of food riots, in 1853 and 1854, both times around September. There seem to have been no incidents in the 1840's⁹. A pamphlet was spread in March 1847 whose authors called on 'to follow the example of Bruges' on the next market day (in March 1847, several bakeries in Bruges were plundered (Deneckere 1997: 88-89)), but apparently without result¹⁰. A year later, in April 1848, 'bands of singing persons' were spotted in the town, but this neither seems to have given rise to a serious disturbance of public tranquillity¹¹.

In the 1850's, on the other hand, the population of Sint-Niklaas did not stay quiet. On Wednesday evening, September 21 1853, around 7 o'clock, a group of people gathered in front of the house of J. Bauwens in Sint-Niklaas. According to the mayor, there were about 200 to 300 people, according to the chronicler, there were 3.000, mainly 'shouting women'. Bauwens was a miller and grain merchant of Sint-Niklaas. After shouting for one and a half hour, people started throwing projectiles. Some windows and roof tiles were broken, while others broke a fence. This happened in the presence of the public authority. The forces appeared three times on the scene, and the crowd became quiet when they did. Yet the forces were unable to disband the gathering. Only around 11 o'clock at night did the crowd break up¹².

08.09.1854, Reg. D/3, N° 152) [from the mayor] to the public prosecutor; SAO, Microfilm 656-B81: Gazette van Audenaerde, 1850-1855: 10.09.1854, N° 37, 20th year, p. 2, 2nd column

⁹ There are no indications of any food riots found in the administration's correspondence, the newspaper *Gazette van het Land van Waes* (first six months of 1846 and 1847 searched through, although numerous copies of 1847 haven't been preserved) and the article of Van den Bossche, who investigated the crisis of the 1840's. SASN, Modern Archief, 294: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1844-1846) and 295: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1846-1849); KOKW, B8: Gazette van het Land van Waes (04.01.1846-28.06.1846; 03.01.1847-09.05.1847); Van Den Bossche, N. (2007). "Behoefte Sint-Niklaas in 1840-1848." *Archivaria* 4(12): 128-142.

¹⁰ RAG, Provincie Oost-Vlaanderen 1830-1850, 0986: Voedselrellen maart 1847: Letter (Dendermonde, 09.03.1847) from the public prosecutor to the general prosecutor. This file also contains a transcript of the text found:

*"Aen UE nootlijdende medeburgen,
ons voornemen is UE aen te wakkeren UE den 11sten dezer alhier op de markt te laeten vinden, ten Eynde het
voornemen der bruggelingen te volgen waer over UE verdere berigten ontvangen zult.
Wee aen de opkooers van granen
Wee Wee aen onzen stadsgenoot B ...
N. B. wij verzoeken te vergaderen tusschen de vismijn en de vleesmarkt.
B. W.L.R."*

¹¹ SASN, Modern Archief, 295: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1846-1849): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 03.04.1848, N° 904) to the *Maréchal de logis Commandant la brigade de Gendarmerie* in this town

¹² Based on the report of the events by the mayor to the governor (SASN, Modern Archief, 298: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1853-1854): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 22.09.1853, N° 519) to the governor) and the report of an anonymous

The town remained restless in the days that followed. The next day, the 22nd, stones were thrown at the house of a certain Pareys. There was also an announcement that on the 23rd, three other houses would be visited, whose owners were thought to be grain traders. On the evening of the 23rd, a detachment of the army arrived in town to aid state and local police. Neighbourhoods where crowds might gather were patrolled. Four arrests were made¹³. Gradually order in Sint-Niklaas was restored¹⁴, even though the presence of extra state police troops was deemed useful as late as end October¹⁵.

The riots of September 1854 were more intense and lasted longer. The disturbances started on the market of Thursday August 31¹⁶. At nine o'clock in the morning, when the rye market opened, the place was 'flooded' by a crowd, mainly women of the labouring class. Tradesmen indicated as 'engrossers' were threatened, and attempts were made to prevent them from entering the market. A gentleman from Beveren was taken for an engrosser and threatened by the crowd. Still, the market for rye, wheat and other grains could take place properly. In the afternoon, when the buyers returned home, two millers were attacked at the edge of the town. One was beaten, another's merchandise was damaged, but both could escape. In the evening, around half past eight, there were gatherings on the town square. Support was sought in the labouring neighbourhoods of the town, but they were dispersed by the mounted state police. By 10 o'clock, everything was calm. Six or seven arrested persons were freed in the morning.

Soon the rumour spread that on the next market day there would be riots again. Transactions on the market would be controlled, and there would be 'excesses' if prices were not to the liking of the crowd¹⁷. That Thursday, there were disturbances indeed¹⁸. Already at 7 o'clock in the morning, 'riotous crowds' had formed around the different markets. Threats were vented at sellers to sell at low prices. This 'incitement' would have continued until 9 or 10 o'clock, when the rye and wheat markets opened. According to the mayor, the crowd would then have gone as far as taking the merchandise from the owners and selling it at their own prices. Prices were set at 9 or 11 guilders per sack for wheat, 7 guilders for rye, 15 or 16 shilling per kg. for butter and 6 fr. (per sack?) for potatoes (prices differing according to the source, see Tabel 1 for their conversion into conventional currencies and measures).

The chronicler describes how everything started at the beginning of the first market. The butter of women who asked more than 15 shilling per kg., was taken and 'waistingly' smeared on their backs and faces. Women who had fled with their eggs in the confessional boxes of the church, were drawn out and had their eggs taken. Elsewhere beer and jenever was consumed. On the grain market, only bakers and millers would be allowed to buy grain. Bakers were forced to buy grain at the prices fixed by the crowd. When a buyer

chronicler (KOKW, A2: Kroniek 'Van Aalst', boek II, p. 266) which is also the main source of Buvé (Buvé, A. (1967). "Pauperisme, drank... of ophitsing: de bloedige onlusten te St. Niklaas in de jaren 1853-1854." Koninklijke Oudheidkundige Kring van het Land van Waas 70(1-2): 85-93.). Van Aalst is the donator of the chronic, the author of the part treating most of the nineteenth century is unknown.

¹³ SASN, Modern Archief, 298: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1853-1854): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 24.09.1853, N° 523) to the governor

¹⁴ SASN, Modern Archief, 298: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1853-1854): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 25.09.1853, N° 527) aan de gouverneur; Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 28.09.1853, N° 532) to the governor

¹⁵ SASN, Modern Archief, 298: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1853-1854): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 19.10.1853, N° 578) to the commandor of the state police

¹⁶ SASN, Modern Archief, 298: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1853-1854): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 01.09.1854, N° 1.228) to the governor. The chronicler of Sint-Niklaas speaks only of a grain factor (one of the millers?), an inhabitant of Burcht, being chased and beaten, but able to get away (KOKW, A2: Kroniek 'Van Aalst', boek II, p. 280); KBR, Krantencollectie, JB119: Gazet van St. Nicolaes, 03.09.1854, 2nd year, N° 36, p. 3, 1st column

¹⁷ SASN, Modern Archief, 298: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1853-1854): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 04.09.1854, N° 1.234) to the public prosecutor of Termonde; Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 06.09.1854, N° 1.238) to the public prosecutor of Termonde

¹⁸ Described by the chronicler (KOKW, A2: Kroniek 'Van Aalst', boek II, p. 280 e.v.), the mayor in a letter to the governor (SASN, Modern Archief, 298: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1853-1854): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 08.09.1854, N° 1.243) to the governor), the sub lieutenant commandor of the state police in Termonde in a report on the events in Sint-Niklaas (RAG, Provincie 1850-1870, 1403-16: Rellen op markten in de provincie (1854-1855): Letter (Gent, 08.09.1854) from the *capitaine-commandant la gendarmerie de Flandre Orientale* to the governor) and both newspapers (KBR, Krantencollectie: JB119: Gazet van St. Nicolaes, 10.09.1854, 2nd year, N° 37, p. 2, 2nd column; JB340: Gazette van het Land van Waes, 10.09.1854, 13th year, N° 37, Annex, p. 2, 2nd-3^d column)

would ask the price, not the farmers but the rioters answered and sold the grain. As soon as the grain market opened, the crowd went through the corridors of the market, in search for sellers who dared ask more than the fixed prices. On the potato market, a basket of potatoes was overthrown after its seller had asked more than 6 fr.

Around 10 o'clock, the armed forces received order to evacuate the entire market. After summoning the crowd to conform, the state police did so forcefully with bare sabre. Guns were aimed at individuals, but no shot seems to have hit its target. At the same time, stones were thrown at the state police. The sublieutenant of the state police evacuated the market very harshly, slashing with his sabre left and right on everything that came on his way. Several market visitors were injured, several women fainted from fear, and considerable damage was inflicted on the market. One farmer, Pierre Cooreman, dropped dead. He was said to have died of fear, though many believed he was hit by a bullet. Around 11 o'clock, an estimated 7.000 visitors of the market were driven off, and the great square was more or less completely evacuated.

In the evening there were threats of new plunders, but around 6 o'clock two army companies arrived in town and everything remained quiet. The danger of disturbances kept lurking for several days however. Only on September 22 could the mayor write that calm in town was restored¹⁹.

The market riots of September 1854 compared

Too little is known about the bread riots in Oudenaarde in 1847 to allow further investigation. The same could be said, though to a lesser extent, about the attack on the miller's house in Sint-Niklaas in 1853. The markets riots of 1854 in both towns, on the other hand, are well documented. Because they happened at the same moment, a comparison becomes interesting.

First of all, it is apparent that the riots in Sint-Niklaas went much further than what happened in Oudenaarde. The actions of September 7 in Oudenaarde were aimed at tradesmen, who were prevented entry to the market. When they were driven out, calm returned. A week earlier, a similar action had happened in Sint-Niklaas. On August 31, the actions of rioters were aimed at tradesmen as well. On September 7, however, the crowd reverted to *taxation populaire*. Maximum prices were imposed; food was sold by the crowd or symbolically wasted.

Perhaps the events in Oudenaarde and Sint-Niklaas weren't as disciplined and well-informed as the model of the classic food riot upholds. In both towns, not only tradesmen, but also those mistaken to be so, were targeted. Even the imposed prices in Sint-Niklaas were not always respected: some bags of rye are said to have been sold at a mere four guilders, far below the imposed price²⁰. The considerable amount of alcohol consumed by some makes a lack of discipline only more plausible²¹.

In both towns, the riots seem to have been the work of the poorer strata of the population. In Sint-Niklaas on August 31, the market was flooded by a crowd of the labouring class, consisting mainly of women. Two millers were attacked by the '*basse classe*'. One of them was chased by a multitude of women and children, throwing sticks and mud at him. During the gathering on the town square that evening, support was sought in a populous workers' district²². Less is known about the participants of the disturbances a week later. The chronicler speaks only of a 'great crowd' or 'the little people' ("het volkxken"²³). When the house of a brewer was invaded that morning by about a hundred people, a weaver of Sint-Niklaas was involved, who got injured when the police intervened²⁴. Afterwards, 65 people were arrested, whose names, residence and punishment are listed by the chronicler²⁵. Their professions are not known. All we know is that among

¹⁹ SASN, Modern Archief, 298: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1853-1854): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 22.09.1854, N° 1.271) to the governor

²⁰ KBR, Krantencollectie: JB119: Gazet van St. Nicolaes, 10.09.1854, 2nd year, N° 37, p. 2, 2nd column

²¹ According to the chronicler, about 50 litre of jenever was drunk in short time, 'mostly by the women'. KOKW, A2: Kroniek 'Van Aalst', boek II, p. 280-282; RAG, Provincie 1850-1870: 1403-16: Rellen op markten in de provincie (1854-1855): Letter (Gent, 08.09.1854) from the *capitaine-commandant la gendarmerie de Flandre Orientale* to the governor

²² SASN, Modern Archief, 298: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1853-1854): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 01.09.1854, N° 1.228) to the governor

²³ KOKW, A2: Kroniek 'Van Aalst', boek II, p. 282

²⁴ RAG, Provincie 1850-1870: 1403-16: Rellen op markten in de provincie (1854-1855): Letter (Gent, 08.09.1854) from the *capitaine-commandant la gendarmerie de Flandre Orientale* to the governor

²⁵ KOKW, A2: Kroniek 'Van Aalst', boek II, p. 286-300, 290 (onregular paging)

them were thirteen bakers and two millers, condemned for buying grain below its price, whether or not under pressure of the crowd. The large majority of people arrested came from Sint-Niklaas. Two came from Waasmunster and two from Hamme.

In Oudenaarde, on the market of September 7 1854, apart from groups of workers, “personnes de mauvaise conduite” were noticed. Around those persons, groups formed, inciting each other against grain traders. Around noon, the market was flooded by a mass of women accompanied by children. One tradesman on the market was attacked by a worker from town, another threatened by a barber. A factor who wanted to leave the market at about two o'clock was chased by a “foule de gamins”. The main ‘inciters’ were all inhabitants of the town. Among them, there was one baker²⁶.

In both events, women and children seem to have played a significant part. Certainly in Sint-Niklaas were women more than passive bystanders. The names of fifteen people who were arrested earliest are listed by the *Gazette van het Land van Waes*²⁷. Their role in the events of September 7 is made clear by assigning them military grades. The whole group was under command of ‘general’ Pieter Maes. Several others appear to have played leading roles. Three men are indicated as ‘captain’: Geeraerd Hanssens, Pieter-Jan De Cock, and Joseph Van Havere. Two women get the same rank: Jakoba Steveling (‘de roste Koba’) and Klaudina Hendrickx (‘de schele Kloddiene’). A third woman, Emerentia De Block, is called general. Among the 65 people who were eventually arrested, there were twenty women²⁸.

In both towns, large parts of the population had sympathy for the rioters. “[L]’esprit de la majeure partie de nos habitants de toutes les classes n’est nullement animé de dispositions tendantes à aider la répression des actes séditeux²⁹”, according to the mayor of Sint-Niklaas. Several members of that town’s vigilant patrol refused to intervene. One of the refusing lieutenants, answered that “les marchands de grains n’auraient qu’à monter eux mêmes la garde³⁰.” That the riotous crowd of Oudenaarde too might have had sympathy of other parts of the population is indicated by the following incident. The substitute of the public prosecutor was present on the market that day, to spot inciters. When one such person was spotted, the substitute asked Vanderstraeten, the town architect who was standing next to him, if he knew his name. Henri Ronsse, brewer and member of the communal council, equally present, said “il a ses agents, il ne faut être dénonciateur.” An intensive argument followed between the substitute and Ronsse, in which the mayor needed to intervene³¹. It is conceivable that Ronsse’s attitude is representative for a larger part of Oudenaarde’s population. Henri Ronsse might be related to Charles Ronsse, editor of the progressive, liberal *Gazette van Audenaerde* (Ronsijn 2004: 59-61). On the other hand, Henri Ronsse was not just member of the communal council but brewer as well. For his profession, he used a considerable amount of grain, and felt himself the effects of dearth. In such circumstances, brewers were often the target of attacks, as was the case that morning in Sint-Niklaas. Therefore, Ronsse’s attitude is not clear to interpret.

A considerable difference existed between Oudenaarde and Sint-Niklaas when it comes to the strength of the repressive apparatus. Oudenaarde was a garrison town, harbouring on average 500 to 600 soldiers³². When it became known there would be riots on the market of September 7, the chief of local police contacted the state police, and the local army commander gave order to bring a group of infantry soldiers under arms. On the next day, seeing that local police, aided by seven or eight members of state police, were having difficulties to maintain order, the mayor ordered a first, and later a second, group of soldiers to

²⁶ SAO, Modern Archief, OUD 744.2-5: Graanmarkt te Oudenaarde: Original of letter (Oudenaarde, 08.09.1854, Reg. D/3, N° 152) [from the mayor] to the public prosecutor

²⁷ KBR, Krantencollectie: JB340: Gazette van het Land van Waes, 24.09.1854, 13th year, N° 38 [sic: 39], Annex, p. 1, 3^d column

²⁸ KOKW, A2: Kroniek ‘Van Aalst’, boek II, p. 286-300, 290 (onregular paging)

²⁹ SASN, Modern Archief, 298: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1853-1854): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 08.09.1854, N° 1.243) to the governor

³⁰ SASN, Modern Archief, 298: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1853-1854): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 08.09.1854, N° 1.243) to the governor

³¹ SAO, Modern Archief, OUD 744.2-5: Graanmarkt te Oudenaarde: Original of letter (Oudenaarde, 07.09.1854, Reg. D/3 N° 151) [from the mayor] to the governor; Original of letter (Oudenaarde, 29.09.1854, Reg. D/3, N° 153) from the mayor to the public prosecutor

³² *Exposé de la situation du royaume*, 1841-1850: Titre III, p. 640

intervene. Afterwards it became clear their intervention was not necessary. Wherever the police showed up, it was respected³³.

The situation in Sint-Niklaas was different. Before 1853, no soldiers were permanently present in town. After the disturbances of 1853, the town asked for a garrison but only received a depot from the ministry of War³⁴. Their intervention during the events of August and September 1854, however, seems initially to have been limited to guarding the arms storage³⁵. After the unexpected events of August 31 1854, state policemen were sent to Sint-Niklaas from several surrounding places³⁶. After the events of September 7, two companies of soldiers were sent from Ghent to Sint-Niklaas to preserve order³⁷. This support from outside was necessary, because Sint-Niklaas was unable to impose order on its own. Local police and vigilant patrol were too weak (Verschaeren 1972). The head of vigilant patrol offered his services after the events of September 7, but when he called on his troops, only three or four men showed up. The declaration of one of his lieutenants has already been mentioned³⁸. The police of Sint-Niklaas was in no better state. When in 1854 maximum prices were imposed on the market for butter, this would have happened under the very eyes of the chief of police, who didn't intervene³⁹. The town administration recognised the problems with their chief of police: “[S]a légèreté jointe à son âge déjà un peu avancé et à son obésité le rendent de jour en jour moins propre à remplir les fonctions de commissaire de police [...]”⁴⁰.

Tabel 1. Market prices in Sint-Niklaas, August 31 - September 14 1854⁴¹

	Wheat (fr. per hl.)	Rye (fr. per hl.)	Butter (fr. per kg.)	Potatoes (fr. per hl.)
Imposed prices				
On 7/9/1854	18,60 (11 guilders per sack)	11,83 (7 guilders per sack)	1,36 (15 shilling per kg.)	5,59 (6 fr. per sack)
Registered prices				
On 31/8/1854	28,00	16,50	2,09	6,00
7/9/1854	20,40	13,60	1,72	5,50
14/9/1854	26,50	17,50	2,18	6,40

³³ SAO, Modern Archief, OUD 744.2-5: Graanmarkt te Oudenaarde (1811-1876): Original of letter (Oudenaarde, 08.09.1854, Reg. D/3, N° 152) [from the mayor] to the public prosecutor

³⁴ RAG, Provincie 1850-1870: 1403-15: Onlusten te Sint-Niklaas (1854): Original of letter (Gent, 29.09.1854) from the governor to the minister of Interior; Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 22.09.1854) from the mayor and aldermen to the governor

³⁵ SASN, Modern Archief, 298: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1853-1854): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 01.09.1854, N° 1.228) to the governor

³⁶ SASN, Modern Archief, 298: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1853-1854): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 04.09.1854, N° 1.234) to the public prosecutor in Termonde; Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 05.09.1854, N° 1.236) to the *Lieutenant Commandant la Gendarmerie* in Termonde; Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 05.09.1854, N° 1.237) to the *Maréchal des Logis Commandant la Brigade de Gendarmerie* in Lokeren and the state police sergeant in Beveren

³⁷ RAG, Provincie 1850-1870: 1403-15: Onlusten te Sint-Niklaas (1854): Original of letter (Gent, 07.09.1854) from the governor to the *lieutenant général commandant* in Ghent; Letter (Gent, 21.[09.1854]) from the *lieutenant général commandant* to the governor; Original of letter (Gent, 21.09.1854) from the governor to the *lieutenant général*; see also the other letters in the third bundle of this file.

³⁸ SASN, Modern Archief, 298: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1853-1854): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 08.09.1854, N° 1.243) to the governor

³⁹ RAG, Provincie 1850-1870: 1403-15: Onlusten te Sint-Niklaas (1854): Original of letter (Gent, 09.09.1854) from the governor to the mayor and aldermen of Sint-Niklaas

⁴⁰ RAG, Provincie 1850-1870: 1403-15: Onlusten te Sint-Niklaas (1854): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 12.09.1854) from the mayor and aldermen to the governor

⁴¹ SASN, Modern Archief, 4717: Register van mercurialen (1854 - 1864). Imposed prices recalculated at 1,073 hl. per Ghent sack and 0,55125 Brabant guilders per Belgian frank.

Collective violence over food in the 1840's and 1850's

The riots that took place in Oudenaarde and Sint-Niklaas in the 1840's and 1850's were not unique. Elsewhere in Belgium, France and England around the middle of the nineteenth century, food riots took place.

Diverse disturbances in March-July 1847

An overview of all incidents is difficult to give and unlike to be complete. What follows is an attempt to bring the main occurrences in East- and West-Flanders and surroundings together⁴². As it appears, there were disturbances elsewhere too, particularly in March and May 1847.

As early as October 1846, dearth gave rise to discontent in Antwerp. Placards and pamphlets protesting against high prices were found and these gave rise to gatherings⁴³. 'Instigating' pamphlets were also found in several places in March 1847. That month, riots broke out on the markets of Wavre, Courtrai and Grammont. In Grammont, for example, a basket of potatoes was overthrown and its contents distributed by the people⁴⁴. Between Menin and Ypres, a grain transport was looted by 'a gang of women and boys'⁴⁵. A ship loaded with grain was looted in Sint-Martens-Lathem (Velle 1994). In Renaix, the same happened to the house of a grain tradesman. That same month, several bakeries in Bruges were looted. In April, the house of a baker was plundered in Hooglede and on the market in Ghent, a chariot of potatoes was overthrown and the potatoes distributed⁴⁶. In May, there were again bread riots in Brussels, Oudenaarde, Ghent and Tournai⁴⁷. Later, in June, there was protest against bakers in Antwerp and Ostend. Finally, markets were disturbed in Antwerp in June and Ghent in July 1847.

In spite of all that, the general perception is that collective violence over food was rather rare in the very expensive winter and spring of 1847. Collective actions were the exception, individual actions the rule (Jacquemyns 1929: 329; Vanhaute 2007: 137). Also striking is the diversity of the repertoire. Markets were not the only scene of uproar. The looting of bakeries in March in Bruges and in May in Ghent seems to have been the most large-scale event. Furthermore, grain transports were also attacked.

Soon after the effects of the potato blight became apparent, measures were taken by the central government to counteract its consequences. The im- and export regime was adapted. Already in September 1845 import duties on grain, potatoes and other foodstuffs were abolished, and export was prohibited. This customs regime was partly maintained until February 1850 (Delfosse 1983: 22-24; Vanhaute 2007: 138). The most important effort, however, came from local administrative institutions, with the financial support of the central government. According to Vanhaute (2007: 138-139, 145), most of the crisis' impact was handled through local economic and social networks. In the end, the elites had vested interests in maintaining the rural economy that produced most of their incomes.

Considering this effort to alleviate the effects of the harvest failure, the model of the classic food riot would predict collective violence over food in the 1840's to be rather limited. In certain respects, this seems to have been the case. Yet, despite the fact that food riots in the 1840's are considered to have been rather exceptional, not all remained calm in this decade. If it isn't a hesitating government, what can explain these riots?

If we look closer into the actions of the 1840's, in many cases they were directed at specific persons or specific cases. It is possible that particularly those who were thought not to follow the emergency measures of the moment were targeted. While export was prohibited, the grain ship looted in Sint-Martens-Latem was on its way to France (Velle 1994: 9) (perhaps only carrying transit grain). A grain transport was

⁴² Unless otherwise mentioned, the overview that follows is based on: Jacquemyns 1929: 324-329; Deneckere, 1997: 86-95 and the overview in the *Moniteur Belge*, 09.08.1847, Rapport au roi, Annexe XXI: Note relative aux désordres locaux

⁴³ RAR, Microfilm B80: Gazette van Audenaerde, 25.10.1846, 12th year, N° 43, p. 3, 1st column

⁴⁴ RAR, Microfilm B80: Gazette van Audenaerde, 14.03.1847, 13th year, N° 11, p. 3, 1st column

⁴⁵ RAR, Microfilm B80: Gazette van Audenaerde, 21.03.1847, 13th year, N° 12, p. 3, 1st column. The *Moniteur Belge* speaks only of an *attempt* to pillage a grain transport in Gheluwelt.

⁴⁶ RAR, Microfilm B80: Gazette van Audenaerde, 25.04.1847, 13th year, N° 17, p. 3, 1st column

⁴⁷ Tournai: RAR, Microfilm B80: Gazette van Audenaerde, 16.05.1847, 13th year, N° 20, p. 3, 1st column

plundered between Ypres and Menin, which is near the French border. Perhaps the looting of bakeries was particularly aimed at those suspected of selling adulterated bread or bread below its indicated weight? Pressuring the local or central government to take action (cfr. Tilly 1971) is but one possible aim of food riots. Punishing those who didn't follow the rules is another, and it is likely that in the 1840's it was especially this latter goal that motivated rioters. In both cases, riots find their origin in moral indignation over certain practices, but are aimed at the government in one case, and at specific perpetrators in the other. In the last case, declarative measures alone are not sufficient; they need to be observed as well. 'Targeted' looting or harassing would follow when emergency measures were taken, but for some reason not enforced. Whether or not the government approves the actions of these rioters⁴⁸, the aims of both coincide, to a certain extent. The intention of the looters of the 1840's might not have been in the first place to assist the government, yet, all in all, they served to help the government tighten its grip. In the 1840's, both government intervention and riots were part of a society trying to overcome the crisis. This is an example of a crisis that rather confirms and reinforces the existing social order, than forming a threat against it (cfr. Walter and Wrightson 1976).

Measures were clearly taken by the central government. In many cases, a decisive role was probably played by the local government in preventing or evoking riots. In Oudenaarde and Sint-Niklaas, several measures were taken to alleviate the worst effects of the crisis (Ronsijn 2004: 196-205, 259-347; Van Den Bossche 2007: 136-142). The financial allowances of local poor relief were increased, cheap soups were distributed. That neither town saw market riots, could be the result of measures to keep grain prices from rising too high. In March 1847, a merchant agreed to sell 100 hl. of grain at a loss to the mayor of Oudenaarde. Two weeks in a row, this grain was sold on the market below the prevailing price. This action caused prices to drop. The local newspaper reported that other merchants too intended to offer foreign grain on the local market, at a price below the one it was bought at in Antwerp⁴⁹. When later, in April and May, prices rose even higher than before, the *Gazette van Audenaerde* pleaded for these actions to be repeated by the administration⁵⁰. In Sint-Niklaas also, foreign grain brought relief. By the end of April, a 'provisioning committee' was appointed to treat with local merchants to guarantee the supply of the market and prevent grain prices from rising any further. From May until the end of July, grain merchants supplied the market of Sint-Niklaas with considerable quantities of foreign rye, sold at prices significantly below those of inland rye. They were compensated for their loss by the administration⁵¹.

A lack of control on bakers by the local government could be an explanation for the numerous bread riots of 1847. It was only after the bread riots of March that the Assize of Bread was (re-)introduced in Ghent and Bruges. According to Deneckere (1997: 90), when the Assize was again abandoned, the bread riots in May broke out in Ghent. A similar reason might explain why bread riots took place in Oudenaarde in May 1847 and not in Sint-Niklaas. There is a big difference between both towns in the way the local government intervened in the sale of bread.

According to the Royal Decree van January 25 1826, the Assize of Bread was obligatory in every commune where bread was sold. This meant that the price of bread was fixed by the local authorities, in accordance with the price of grain. Each time the price of grain changed, the price of bread needed to be adjusted accordingly, taking into account the costs of the baker, who needed a fair compensation for his efforts. The

⁴⁸ Perhaps not approval, but at least considerable compassion was shown in the case of the looters of the grain ship in Sint-Martens-Latem. The defending lawyer especially stressed the fact that rioters were driven by hunger, but also referred to the psychological shock brought about by exporting wheat in times of dearth. In first instance, out of 27 accused, 21 people were acquitted and 6 were condemned to 5 years of imprisonment. Later, the court of cassation broke this verdict, and in a second trial the six remaining convicts were freed, only having to pay the (considerable) costs of the trials (Velle, 1994: 18-20).

⁴⁹ Ronsijn, 2004: 201-202; RAR, Microfilm B80: *Gazette van Audenaerde*, 21.03.1847, 13th year, N° 12, p. 2, 3^d column; 28.03.1847, 13th year, N° 13, p. 2, 1st column

⁵⁰ RAR, Microfilm B80: *Gazette van Audenaerde*, 04.04.1847, 13th year, N° 14, p. 2, 3^d column; 18.04.1847, 13th year, N° 16, p. 2, 2nd column; 02.05.1847, 13th year, N° 18, p. 3, 1st column

⁵¹ KBR, *Krantencollectie*, JB340: *Gazette van het Land van Waes*, 25.09.1853, 12th year, N° 39, p. 1, 1st-3^d column; SASN, MA: 4716: *Register van mercurialen* (1839 - 1853), market of 06.05.1847; SASN, MA: 4720: *Kladboeken voor het opmaken van de mercurialen* (1820-1853): Nr. 9, markets of 01, 08, 15 and 23.07.1847; SASN, MA: 21: *Resolutieboek van de gemeenteraad* (1841-1848): Sessions of 28.04.1847, 26.05.1847, 16.06.1847, 12.07.1847

bread that was sold needed to conform to prescriptions: the correct composition and weight. The Assize of Bread had two functions. On the one hand, it protected the consumer: if bakers followed rules, the buyer could be sure he bought good bread at a fair price. On the other hand, it also protected the baker against complaints of unhappy customers. With the Assize of Bread, the responsibility over the price of bread moved from bakers to the local government.

Although legally obligatory, the Assize of Bread was not always practiced, such as in Bruges and Ghent before the riots. Neither was it practiced in Oudenaarde. The reason the administration gave was competition with its suburbs. If the bakers of Oudenaarde were to be subjected to the Assize, those of neighbouring Leupegem and Bevere would sell more bread at lower prices. According to the mayor, it was precisely this competition that made the bakers of Oudenaarde produce good bread, with the correct weight and at a reasonable price⁵². Even so, there were complaints in Oudenaarde about abuses committed by bakers, about the quality and weight of bread (Ronsijn 2004: 203). The absence of an official Assize of Bread and suspicions of fraud could have been the cause of the bread riots in May 1847.

In Sint-Niklaas, on the other hand, the Assize of Bread was strictly followed, and it was even actively used by the administration as a means to limit the effects of the crisis. Already in December 1845 a resolution went out from the communal council imposing fines for those who sold bread that didn't conform to prescriptions (Van Den Bossche 2007: 137). In stead of having to fear competition of neighbouring villages, those villages too followed the Assize of Sint-Niklaas. In January 1846 the bakers of nearby Beveren-Waas complained that the price of rye bread set by Sint-Niklaas was too low. The administration of Sint-Niklaas recognised this was the case, but did not dare to change it, fearing to disturb public tranquillity. The town administration had asked its bakers to be patient, until circumstances allowed the prices to be changed⁵³. A year later, this method to keep prices in check was probably not repeated. In any case, bread prices were calculated closely according to the high grain prices⁵⁴. What the local authorities did do, however, in the beginning of May, just days before bread riots broke out in other places, was deciding that henceforth a second type of rye bread, half composed of barley, would be included in the Assize⁵⁵. As barley was cheaper than the other grains, this bread could be sold at a lower price.

Market riots in August-September 1854

Based on what is known at this moment about collective violence around food in the 1840's and 1850's, can be said that there were at least no less riots in 1854 than in 1847. Throughout the 1850's there were several seemingly isolated incidents. On August 30 1853 there were riots in Liege, caused by the dearth of grain. A manufacture of weapons was attacked in the events⁵⁶. On September 21 of that year, the disturbances in Sint-Niklaas took place. On October 3 uproar arose on the potato market of Brussels after one buyer proposed to buy all 50 bags offered for sale, at 9 fr. per 100 kg. The chief of police only permitted that transaction after all other consumers had been able to buy their provisions⁵⁷. In May 1855 a certain Enoch D'hondt was arrested in Sint-Niklaas for disturbing the market and mistreating the police officers⁵⁸. One day in July of that year, on the vegetables market in Ghent, several baskets of potatoes were overthrown because their prices were thought to be excessively high (Deneckere 1997: 94). End September 1856 there was a 'women's uproar' in Ghent, against a women preacher who proposed a far going form of thrift⁵⁹.

⁵² SAO, Modern Archief, Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (Reg. A/13) (1842 - 1843): Letter (Oudenaarde, 09.07.1842, N° 11.362) to the governor; Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (Reg. A/16) (1846 - 1847): Letter (Oudenaarde, 03.03.1846, N° 14.568) to the governor; Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (Reg. A/18) (1848 - 1849): Letter (Oudenaarde, 17.08.1848, N° 16.789) to the governor

⁵³ SASN, Modern Archief, 294: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1844-1846): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 27.01.1846, N° 985) to the district commissar

⁵⁴ SASN, Modern Archief, 4463: Broodzetting: proefbakkerijen (1843-1867): This file contains a list of registered grain prices and corresponding breadprices from January 1847 until May 1849

⁵⁵ SASN, Modern Archief, 295: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1846-1849): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 10.05.1847, N° 408) to the public prosecutor in Termonde

⁵⁶ KBR, Krantencollectie, JB119: Gazet van St. Nicolaes, 16.10.1853, 1st year, N° 40, p. 3, 2nd column

⁵⁷ KBR, Krantencollectie, JB119: Gazet van St. Nicolaes, 09.10.1853, 1st year, N° 39, p. 3, 2nd column

⁵⁸ KBR, Krantencollectie, JB119: Gazet van St. Nicolaes, 27.05.1855, 3^d year, N° 21, p. 2, 3^d column

⁵⁹ KBR, Krantencollectie, JB119: Gazet van St. Nicolaes, 28.09.1856, 4th year, N° 39, p. 3, 2nd column

Apart from these isolated incidents, there was a wave of food riots through East- and West-Flanders in 1854. Whereas the riots reported in 1847 took place over a period of five months during the winter and spring, those of 1854 occurred within a timeframe of about two weeks, from the end of August until the beginning of September. The disturbances on several markets were clearly a response to the fact that, although the harvest of 1854 was a clear success, prices didn't drop to 'normal' levels when that harvest was offered for sale.

Trouble began on Saturday August 26 1854 on the market of Ypres. A French tradesman bought large quantities without underbidding, which ended the initial drop in prices on the market. He was surrounded by working class people, but police succeeded in maintaining order. On August 28 there were riots on the market of Courtrai when two merchants, after refusing to buy rye at 19 fr. per hl., later agreed with another farmer to buy rye at 21 fr. These merchants had to flee to a nearby inn. Another merchant, when leaving this inn, was chased and beaten. The day afterwards, the local and state police were unable to prevent the looting of a grain tradesman's house. The same week, there were gatherings in Menen. Seven bakeries were looted⁶⁰. On August 30, a gathering of workers on the market of Lokeren could be kept in hand by local and state police, but in the afternoon and evening several merchants were attacked on the street by women and children⁶¹. On August 31, the first market riot in Sint-Niklaas took place. In the night between September 4 and 5, notes were distributed in Bruges' labouring neighbourhoods, inviting the workmen to gather on the Maeleveld to think about means to improve their situation. Some of those notes contained threats against the rich⁶². On September 5 and 6 there were severe riots in Brussels after one woman bought bread that apparently didn't had the required weight. People gathered in front of the bakery where it was sold, windows were broken and the shop was overrun by the crowd⁶³. On September 7, the markets of Oudenaarde and Sint-Niklaas were the scene of riots. Also in Malines there would have been disturbances⁶⁴. Compared to the 1840's, government responded only slowly. Import duties were lifted quickly, but export prohibitions were subject of a harsh debate. Two differing groups opposed each other on the policy to follow. Industrialists would benefit from low food prices, while high food prices meant high incomes for landowners. As a result, export of potatoes was prohibited already in October 1853, but export of grain was only prohibited a year later, in November 1854.

Most collective violence over food in 1854 seems to have taken place on markets. In most of those market riots, tradesmen were targeted. In several cases, not specific individuals but tradesmen in general were refused access to the market. The *taxation populaire* on Sint-Niklaas' second riotous market day, and the bread riots in Menen and Brussels, were only exceptions to the general pattern. Tradesmen were perceived to be the main cause of dearth, and would continue to be so as long as export of grain was allowed⁶⁵. This time, riots probably served to pressure the government to take action.

In Oudenaarde, the riots seem to have had few immediate results. In Sint-Niklaas, in certain respects the riots weren't very successful either. Bakers refused to sell bread at prices set according to those of grain of 7 September, and few days later, these prices were adjusted by the administration to match 'real' price levels⁶⁶. A week after the riots, prices were back at their previous level, or even higher, and market supplies had dropped considerably⁶⁷. On the other hand, the riots in Sint-Niklaas achieved one clear result. On September 4 1854, already after the first riotous market, the communal council sent a petition to the

⁶⁰ KBR, Krantencollectie, JB340: Gazette van het Land van Waes, 03.09.1854, 13th year, N° 36, p. 2, 1st-2nd column (Describes the events of Courtrai, Menin and Ypres, without mentioning dates)

⁶¹ RAG, Provincie 1850-1870: 1403-16: Minuut van brief (Gent, 02.09.1854) van de gouverneur aan de minister van Binnenlandse Zaken

⁶² KBR, Krantencollectie, JB119: Gazet van St. Nicolaes, 2nd year, N° 37, 10.09.1854, p. 3, 1^e column

⁶³ KBR, Krantencollectie, JB119: Gazet van St. Nicolaes, 2nd year, N° 37, 10.09.1854, p. 3, 1^e column

⁶⁴ KBR, Krantencollectie, JB340: Gazette van het Land van Waes, 10.09.1854, 13th year, N° 37, Annex, p. 2, 2^e-3^e column

⁶⁵ See, for example: KBR, Krantencollectie, JB340: Gazette van het Land van Waes, 03.09.1854, 13th year, N° 36, p. 1, 1st-2nd column

⁶⁶ SASN, MA: 23: Resolutieboek van de gemeenteraad (1852-1855): Session of 09.09.1854; SASN, Modern Archief, 298: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1853-1854): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 09.09.1854, N° 1.246) to the *major commandant de place* in Sint-Niklaas

⁶⁷ KOKW, A2: Kroniek 'Van Aalst', boek II, p. 300

government, asking for an export prohibition on grains⁶⁸. A similar petition was sent by the council in 1853⁶⁹. Back then, the Chamber of Representatives couldn't be convinced to prohibit grain exports. End November 1854, on the other hand, it could (Delfosse 1990: 73-74). The wave of market riots end August - beginning September might have influenced the Chamber's decision.

The last food riots in the 1850's

When it comes to the *form* food riots took, those of the 1840's as well as those of the 1850's more or less conform to the image of the model. The *occurrence* of riots in the 1840's is less foreseen by the model of the classic food riot. Riots in the 1840's were not so much intended to pressure the authorities to take action, as they were intended to punish certain 'wrongdoers'. In the 1850's, on the other hand, the market riots served as a leverage to pressure the government into prohibiting grain export. Still, in certain respects the food riots of the 1850's don't conform to the model either. This is related to the changed administrative, economic and social situation of the middle of the nineteenth century.

After the governor of East-Flanders informed the minister of Interior about what had happened on the vegetables market in Ghent in July 1855, he made the remark that such occurrences since a number of years had been seen in several towns of the country, and even twice in Sint-Niklaas. In a further reflection on the matter, he stated that if one were to fully investigate the matter, two things would be found in almost every case. One was the involvement of higher classes: "ils dérivent originairement de quelques mots imprudents tombés de plus haut dans la classe ouvrière." About the case of the vegetables market in Ghent, the governor learned that certain industrialists had spoken out unfavourably on the behaviour of revendors. That would have happened in the presence of their labourers, who further spread what was said. Secondly, a hesitation to act against the first signs of disturbances, could quickly bring about worse: "qu'au début ils auraient été faites réprimer, mais qu'une première hésitation de l'autorité locale, ou quelque faiblesse de la police, leur a tenu bien d'encouragement⁷⁰."

In my view, these are two aspects in which the riots of the 1850's differ from the classic food riot and which are specific for the circumstances of the middle of the nineteenth century. Firstly, it is very plausible that employers played a significant part in bringing about the food riots. In the 1850's, employers had cause for complaints, as high food prices put pressure on wages. Riots could serve to redirect workers' discontent towards sellers and prices in stead of employers and wages. Secondly, the riots in the 1850's distinguish themselves, not by weak repression, but by harsh repression. The governor's remark shows his frustration with the lenience lower administrations could have in matters of collective violence over food. These characteristics were probably not present in each reported incident. In Sint-Niklaas, however, there are several indications this was the case.

Involvement of employers

In Sint-Niklaas, several sources agree there were more than labourers and poor people involved in the disturbances. Even though dearth was the immediate cause of the events in September 1854, both the mayor and the provincial governor claim this was the work of 'incitement', coming from well-to-do people⁷¹. According to the mayor, this incitement came from inhabitants belonging to the *classe moyenne*, and the labouring classes easily followed agitators⁷². According to the governor, it were the industrialists that incited

⁶⁸ SASN, Modern Archief, 298: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1853-1854): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 04.09.1854, N° 1.235) to the governor

⁶⁹ SASN, Modern Archief, 298: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1853-1854): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 30.08.1853, N° 469) to the governor

⁷⁰ RAG, Provincie 1850-1870: 1403-16: Rellen op markten in de provincie (1854-1855): Original of letter (Gent, 27.07.1855) from the governor to the minister of Interior

⁷¹ SASN, Modern Archief, 298: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1853-1854): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 08.09.1854, N° 1.243) to the governor; Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 22.09.1854, N° 1.271) to the governor; RAG, Provincie 1850-1870: 1403-16: Onlusten te Sint-Niklaas (1854): Original of letter (Gent, 29.09.1854) from the governor to the minister of Interior

⁷² SASN, Modern Archief, 298: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1853-1854): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 08.09.1854, N° 1.243) to the governor; Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 22.09.1854, N° 1.271) to the governor

the workers: “Cette facheuse disposition des ouvriers dérive en grande partie de leurs maîtres, messieurs les fabricants.” The industrialists of Sint-Niklaas, according to the governor, had been able to enlarge their wealth quickly, as long as they had a monopoly. When they later had to endure competition, things became difficult. Whereas they were to find a solution for their problems themselves, the governor accused them of blaming everyone, the government inclusive. As a result, local elections were very harsh, members of the ‘*classes levées*’ where fighting each other in sharp writings, and this brought the ‘*classes ignorantes*’ to bad ideas and actions⁷³.

How some people were incited to riot is also described by the chronicler of Sint-Niklaas. Some days before September 7, it was told in several inns that in the outskirts of town, the ‘poor and needy folk’ was ‘incited’ by well-to-do people. They were asked to gather on the next market day and to attempt to bring down the prices of grain, with or without violence. In return they would receive beer and jenever. Indeed, on two or three places, beer and jenever was consumed that day⁷⁴.

Two agitators were arrested. Already a week before the first riots of August 31, on the market of August 25, Amandus-Constantinus Hendrickx was arrested, and charged with ‘attempting to start a revolution on the grain market’⁷⁵. The police learned that on the evening before September 7, Pieter Maes had stirred up the inhabitants of the neighbourhood ‘den Knaptand’, to go to the market together⁷⁶.

On whose behalf these agitators acted, whether they were linked to any employer of Sint-Niklaas, and where all the beer and jenever came from, remains uncertain. Although no direct connection between the riots and the employers of Sint-Niklaas was found, the *Journal d’Anvers* reported that two people were openly accused of indeed *giving* drinks to the crowd that day. According to the source of the newspaper, however, no wage problems lay at the origin of this action, but a dispute that existed between these persons and the town administration about the octroy regulations. The newspaper was referring to the brewer whose house, according to the official account, was taken over by the crowd and who was *forced* to distribute beer. The brewer, Heyndrickx-Percy, pursued the *Journal d’Anvers* for slander, and won the case⁷⁷.

Harsh repression

Throughout the 1850’s the government remained suspicious of food riots. In September 1853 several market towns were addressed by the local public prosecutor, in name of the minister of Justice, to know if, in face of the high prices at that time, there had been any attempts to manipulate prices, whether upwards or downwards. If pamphlets or other objects had been found ‘to incite the people’, then the agitators needed to be tracked down. At the same time the prosecutor needed to be informed about attempts to drive up prices of grains or other foodstuffs. Those involved were to be arrested and brought to court⁷⁸. Shortly after the outbreak of riots in Courtrai and Menen end August 1854, other market towns were informed to prevent recurrences⁷⁹. In October 1855 markets towns were asked again, as in 1853, to be on their guard. This time

⁷³ RAG, Provincie 1850-1870: 1403-15: Onlusten te Sint-Niklaas (1854): Original of letter (Gent, 29.09.1854) from the governor to the minister of Interior

⁷⁴ KOKW, A2: Kroniek ‘Van Aalst’, boek II, p. 280-282; RAG, Provincie 1850-1870: 1403-16: Rellen op markten in de provincie (1854-1855): Letter (Gent, 08.09.1854) from the *capitaine-commandant la gendarmerie de Flandre Orientale* to the governor

⁷⁵ KBR, Krantencollectie: JB340: Gazette van het Land van Waes, 27.08.1854, 13th year, N° 35, Annex, p. 2, 1st column

⁷⁶ KBR, Krantencollectie: JB340: Gazette van het Land van Waes, 24.09.1854, 13th year, N° 38 [sic: 39], Annex, p. 1, 3^d column

⁷⁷ KBR, Krantencollectie: JB340: Gazette van het Land van Waes, 17.09.1854, 13th year, N° 38, p. 2, 1st column; 20.05.1855, 13th year, N° 20, p. 2, 1st-2^d column

⁷⁸ SAO, Modern Archief, OUD 744.2-5: Graanmarkt te Oudenaarde: Letter (Oudenaarde, 02.09.1853) from the public prosecutor to the mayor of Oudenaarde. The same request was also received in Sint-Niklaas: SASN, Modern Archief, 299: Register van uitgaande briefwisseling (1854-1856): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 24.10.1855, N° 776) to the public prosecutor in Termonde

⁷⁹ RAG, Provincie 1850-1870: 1403-16: Rellen op markten in de provincie (1854-1855): Letter (Brussel, 30.08.1854) from the minister of Interior to the governor; Original of letter(Gent, 31.08.1854) from the governor to the mayors of Lokeren, Sint-Niklaas, Grammont, Oudenaarde, Renaix, Termonde, Eeklo, Ninove, Deinze, Alost

the request was particularly concerned with tracing illegitimate trade practices to drive up prices. Every other week a report on this matter needed to be sent to the public prosecutor⁸⁰.

In Sint-Niklaas, the local repressive apparatus was poorly organised. In contrast to Oudenaarde, it wasn't a garrison town, but whenever need arose, soldiers were sent in. End September 1854, the mayor of Sint-Niklaas wrote to the governor it was a cause for fear to think the order in a town of 22.000 inhabitants, among which 14.000 to 15.000 workers who lived only of a wage, was maintained by only nine local and seven state police officers. The administration had been considering reorganising police, but hadn't reached a decision. Vigilant patrol was poorly organised as well. The only solution they saw was to endow the town with a permanent garrison⁸¹. The governor, when transferring this request to the minister of Interior, did not give a positive advice. Sending troops to maintain order 'with the bayonet' was perhaps the easiest solution, but not the best⁸². In spite of that consideration, the governor did not hesitate in 1853, nor in 1854, to send soldiers to Sint-Niklaas. In 1854, troops were sent to Lokeren as well⁸³.

Many of the 65 people arrested in Sint-Niklaas received hard punishments. They were all convicted in one trial. Amandus-Constantinus Hendrickx received eighteen months of imprisonment. Pieter Maes got two years. Others indicated by the newspaper as 'captains' received severe punishment as well. Only four were relieved of charges. Nine were convicted to prison terms of one or two years. Ten got a sentence of six months. Others received shorter terms, minimum one month imprisonment, with possibly an additional fine of 16 to 20 fr. Only three 'regular' participants who had been sentenced from six months to one year of imprisonment, appealed and saw their punishment reduced by one month. The punishment of bakers and millers, who also appealed, was reduced by half, with the exception of those of Hamme. A request to the king for grace had no effect. The general sentiment in town was that these sentences were 'most severe'⁸⁴. To make such severe punishments possible, reference was made to a decree made by the provisional government in the extraordinary circumstances of 1830, during Belgium's struggle for independence. When about half of the convicts appealed, and questioned whether this decree was still valid, the court judged this to be the case⁸⁵.

Not only the participants in the uproar of Sint-Niklaas were punished, but also the local administration. In a confidential letter of end September 1854 to the minister of Interior, the governor showed his frustration with the mayor of Sint-Niklaas. He called the mayor, senator De Munck-Moerman, a 'pathetic' figure, whose 'cowardness' had brought him to escape his responsibilities in 1853 as well. When his term of office as mayor and member of the communal council would come to an end, someone on a high level should give him the advice not to take up any further terms⁸⁶. One month later, end October, there were local elections. For those elections, the mayor and both aldermen indeed refused to take up any further terms. So did several members of the communal council. In the town, it was rumoured that this refusal was connected with the market riots that had happened. In January 1855 De Munck-Moerman was no longer mayor of Sint-Niklaas. He died a few months later, at the end of June, at the age of 51⁸⁷.

⁸⁰ SAO, Modern Archief, OUD 744.2-3: Wekelijkse donderdagmarkt te Oudenaarde: Letter (Oudenaarde, 13.10.1855) from the public prosecutor to the mayor and aldermen of Oudenaarde

⁸¹ RAG, Provincie 1850-1870: 1403-15: Onlusten te Sint-Niklaas (1854): Letter (Sint-Niklaas, 22.09.1854) from the mayor and aldermen to the governor

⁸² RAG, Provincie 1850-1870: 1403-15: Onlusten te Sint-Niklaas (1854): Original of letter (Gent, 29.09.1854) from the governor to the minister of Interior

⁸³ RAG, Provincie 1850-1870: 1403-15: Onlusten te Sint-Niklaas (1854): Original of letter (Gent, 07.04.1854) from the governor to the minister of War; Original of letter (Gent, 07.09.1854) from the governor to the minister of Interior

⁸⁴ KOKW, A2: Kroniek 'Van Aalst', boek II, p. 286-300, 290 (unregular paging)

⁸⁵ Ministerial decree of 05.11.1830. KBR, Krantencollectie, JB119: Gazet van St. Nicolaes, 21.01.1855, 3^d year, N° 3, p. 2, 3^d column; 28.01.1855, 3^d year, N° 4, p. 3, 2^d column

⁸⁶ "pitoyable", "pusillanimité", "[...] à désirer qu'à l'approche du moment ou le mandat de le [sic] sénateur De Muynck comme conseiller communal et bourgmestre va expirer, un avis, venu d'assez haut pour qu'il comprenne l'opportunité de le suivre, le décide à y renoncer formellement pour l'avenir." RAG, Provincie 1850-1870: 1403-15: Onlusten te Sint-Niklaas (1854): Original of letter (Gent, 29.09.1854) from the governor to the minister of Interior

⁸⁷ KOKW, A2: Kroniek 'Van Aalst', boek II, p. 306-308, 321

Conclusions

In this stage of research, it is too early to draw conclusions. Not only is too little known on riots in the period 1845-1860, also much remains unknown on the causes and impact of dearth in the 1850's. We will have to wait for a research that brings several local case studies together and gives a general overview of the extent of food-related disturbances in this period, and the shape it took.

What happened in Oudenaarde and Sint-Niklaas? The food riots of the 1840's and 1850's in both towns correspond to a large extent with the image of the classic food riot. This is particularly true of the market riots of 1854. In both cases, tradesmen were prevented access to the market, and in Sint-Niklaas, the crowd went as far as imposing maximum prices and selling foodstuffs themselves. The riots were the work of the poorer strata of the population, with a significant part played by women and children. The crowd of both towns could count on the sympathy or at least understanding of other groups.

An important difference between both towns is the scale and timing of the disturbances. In Oudenaarde, there were all in all rather small outbursts of violence over food in both decades. Sint-Niklaas, on the other hand, remained quiet in the 1840's, but was restless in the 1850's. There were incidents in 1853 and 1854, and another attempt at disturbing the market was done in 1855. In 1854, the crowd of Sint-Niklaas went further than that of Oudenaarde. Particularly wage workers suffered from the dearth of the 1850's. That might explain why an industrial town as Sint-Niklaas was more prone to riot than an artisan town as Oudenaarde.

There are clear differences between the two crises of 1845-1847 and 1853-1855. In the middle of the 1840's, the failure of the potato and grain harvests was visible for everyone. The increase in deaths and decrease in births show that the impact of this first crisis was larger, hunger was felt much more, and a larger part of the population suffered, compared to the 1850's. Quickly, measures were taken about which there was much consensus. In the 1850's, misery wasn't as visible. The country was mainly confronted with a dearth crisis, not a harvest failure. Especially those who lived from a wage suffered the consequences. Whereas foreign grain brought relief in the 1840's, in the 1850's it was one of the main causes of dearth. Whether the central government needed to intervene or not was subject of a harsh debate.

In the 1840's, society as a whole was hit, and quickly measures were taken to counteract the consequences of the crisis. Food riots in this decade were, considering the circumstances, rather limited and not so much meant to put pressure on the government than they were aimed at individuals who were thought to deviate from emergency measures. Both government intervention and food riots in this decade should be seen as an effort of society as a whole to overcome the crisis.

In the 1850's, on the other hand, one specific group of society was hit, wage workers and their employers. This time, society as a whole was less prepared to engage in a collective effort to overcome the crisis. On the contrary, for landowners high food prices meant high incomes. Two groups, landowners and industrialists, opposed each other over the policy to follow. The wave of market riots in 1854 was clearly related to the perceived insufficiency of governmental intervention. Whereas social cohesion was reinforced in the 1840's under pressure of circumstances, the crisis of the 1850's was rather a 'dividing' crisis.

There were certain elements which make the events described above deviate from the classic food riot, which is essentially based on eighteenth century examples. Two things point to the fact that the riots of 1854 in Oudenaarde and Sint-Niklaas took place in the context of the nineteenth century: the involvement of industrialists, and the willingness of central government to intervene.

Both in Oudenaarde and Sint-Niklaas, there were rumours beforehand that there would be troubles on the next market, and in both cases 'instigators' are mentioned. Although the presence of such instigators might also be the imagination of those responsible for maintaining public order, in Sint-Niklaas at least two persons were arrested for this in 1854. Furthermore, several sources mention that the people of Sint-Niklaas were instigated to riot by well-to-do persons. The industrialists of Sint-Niklaas would have played an important part in bringing about the disturbances. The governor's analysis was probably correct when he said that market riots in the 1850's were often the result of some imprudent statements of employers. They wanted to avoid having to pay out higher wages to their workers to compensate for higher prices. The

employers of Sint-Niklaas probably didn't want their workers' discontent to be translated into wage demands. Therefore, they pointed to tradesmen as responsible for the dearth. Workers were probably easily convinced by the discourse of their employers, more so because they saw their suspicions confirmed when prices remained high after the successful harvest of 1854. It is even possible, although no evidence has been found for that, that instigators were actively sent out by industrialists to bring about market riots. Those riots could be used as a political instrument, to put pressure on the government to take measures against high prices.

The riots of Oudenaarde and Sint-Niklaas also deviate from the 'classic' food riot by the degree of repression. According to Thompson (1971: 121), local authorities often hesitated to send in military troops. That was different in the 1850's. The vigilant patrol and police of Sint-Niklaas were perhaps unable to impose order, but the governor did not hesitate to send in troops to maintain order 'with the bayonet', even though he didn't see this as the best solution himself. In Oudenaarde, a garrison was already present and troops were ready to intervene if necessary. Also, the punishment of the participants in the riots in Sint-Niklaas was felt to be severe.

What is remarkable is that not only the participants in the riots were punished. Some months after the riots, about half of the town administration of Sint-Niklaas resigned. Local administrations had for long known some degree of autonomy in shaping central policies (Tilly 1971: 30). After the French Revolution, however, a strict, centralist administrative apparatus was implemented in the Southern Netherlands during the French occupation, which was preserved afterwards. By having the mayor and aldermen, among others, resign, it was made clear in Sint-Niklaas that the government would no longer tolerate things to get so far out of hand.

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Abbreviations

- KBR: Koninklijke Bibliotheek Brussel
 KOKW: Koninklijke Oudheidkundige Kring van het Land van Waas
 RABe: Rijksarchief Beveren
 RAG: Rijksarchief Gent
 RAR: Rijksarchief Ronse
 SAO: Stadsarchief Oudenaarde
 SASN: Stadsarchief Sint-Niklaas