On 17 May 1916 about three hundred women, mostly soldatki, working on the Leshchinskii estate, Sumy district, incensed by the estate manager’s announcement that their meager wages would be decreased from fifty to forty-five kopeks per day, quit their work, declared that they would not work under such conditions, smashed up some of the estate’s property, and marched off to the local market town, Iunakovka. Picking up other women and youngsters along the way, the women complained to each other about the inflated prices on basic goods, especially sugar. When they arrived at Iunakovka, they gathered around two local shops and accused the store owners of raising prices artificially. Soon they smashed the stores’ windows and streamed inside, damaging property and stealing goods; then they went home.

The violence might have ended there were it not for the police, who the next day arrested seven soldatki implicated in the riot. On 19 May a larger, angry crowd of women gathered around the Iunakovka volost administration building, demanded the release of their sister soldatki, and began throwing rocks through the building’s windows. Volost chief constable Khizhniakov (the same one humiliated and beaten in Nyzhnia Syrovatka) ordered all of his seventeen officers out into the yard to disperse the crowd, but the women met them with a hail of rocks, injuring a sergeant major. Not wishing to worsen the situation and noting that the crowd had now reached about four thousand people, Khizhniakov decided to release the detained soldatki and, seeing that this somewhat quieted the crowd, attempted to convince them to go home. During his exhortations, however, a portion of the crowd drifted away from the administration building to one of the shops ransacked two days past and began to break in again. The police raced to the store and attempted to disperse the crowd, but the rioters shouted to each other: “Do not leave! Beat the police!” They threw rocks at the police, eventually forcing them to take cover in the administration building. Several policemen, including Khizhniakov, were injured in the attack. The crowd then broke into the store, stole much inside, and plundered another store. After the arrival of another police detachment, the rioters gradually dispersed.

The scale of this riot was great enough that the governor himself soon arrived by emergency train from Kharkiv. Although he had five rioters arrested, the police report claimed that the main cause of the riot was “the artificial inflating of prices on goods in general and sugar in particular,” pointing the finger at the local traders and storeowners. The governor ordered an infantry company from Sumy to Iunakovka and reinforced the local police force with officers from other districts, but also took measures to provide the population with essential goods at reasonable prices; the city administration was directed to take this branch of trade into its own hands.

— chapter 1, pages 38–39