
This interesting book on the First World War and demographic realities in Transylvania delivers an overview and new data from a different geographic perspective. Studies concerning the demographic consequences of this conflict tend to be written from a national stance, and focus on European powers to the exclusion of other countries or indeed entire regions. The four chapters of Ioan Bolovan’s work direct the reader away from a general overview to specific data that reveal the impact of the First World War on families. Changes in behaviour and morality are placed in context, as is the role played by religious and civil actors during the conflict. This work is the result of extensive research, using new and unexplored archival sources, and also journals, letters and songs. Furthermore, the author quotes from an international bibliography related to this topic, drawing some interesting parallels. In effect, this book forms a useful international comparison of demographic behaviours and consequences of the Great War, a theme still under-explored in existing scholarship.

The author highlights a clear lack of studies concerning family and matrimonial impacts of the Great War, specifically in Transylvania, where 16.5 per cent of men were called up to fight in the Austro–Hungarian army. Bolovan demonstrates how immediate and profound the consequences were for Transylvanian society, with effects that resonated for decades afterwards. A wide chronological framework is thus essential for an improved understanding of demographic changes, but the data presented range only from 1913 until 1918, and would have benefitted from being drawn from a longer period.

According to the author, the first direct impact of the war on population was on migration, as the Transylvanian men who did not want to be conscripted fled and migrated to Romania (neutral in 1914). Bolovan also mentions the large numbers of refugees and their direct and significant impact on demography, economy, education and culture. Owing to censorship, some intellectuals and opinion-makers were arrested and deported to concentration camps. Others were forced to work, especially men who were too old to be sent to the front, leaving their wives alone with the domestic chores and agriculture work. By emphasising the migration issue, Bolovan also underlines the Hungarian government’s plan to colonise Transylvania by consolidating the Saxon community with German populations from Russia, or Saxon emigrants that had left for America.
Using different data, the author demonstrates regional and local changes in demographic behaviours caused by the First World War and the reasons behind these changes. Nor are differences between rural and industrial areas neglected. Bolovan begins with a synthesis of how birth, mortality and nuptiality rates evolved between 1913 and 1918, highlighting the related outcome of military conflict. Graphs, diagrams and diverse illustrations from photos to paintings offer a more vivid portrait of this subject. After an exploration of detailed statistics for different counties, Bolovan delves into the private family sphere to uncover more of the effects of war on those who went to the battlefields, and on those who stayed behind. In this interesting chapter we learn how immoral behaviours and conjugal infidelity led to repercussions in the traditional Romanian society.

Analysis of the letters sent by soldiers and the replies received from wives or mothers powerfully evokes the families’ worries, difficulties and wishes, once censorship and some sort of standardisation are taken into account. Children are a common theme, as well as tensions within the family and family-in-law; and also the difficulties of wives who were forced to transition quickly to become heads of families, and their longing for absent husbands. If war affected marriage, it also had an impact on couples’ morality. For this reason, Bolovan has also analysed divorce rates and their evolution after the war, when ‘Transylvanian society returned to normal’ (p. 193). Even if after the conflict patriarchalism was once again the rule, Bolovan finds clear examples in the oral tradition, folklore and in the Transylvanian press, of women’s tendency to earn equality and to improve their status within the family and the community.

The last chapter is devoted to illustrating how the church and society reacted to and supported Transylvanian families during the war. The author gives several examples of how clergy tried to correct undesirable behaviours and maintain moral standards among the troops. They implemented pronatalist measures, reduced baptism and marriage parties to the strict minimum, and organised fundraising efforts. There is also mention of the Romanian elite’s charitable efforts in collecting donations in favour of war orphans, and Romanian society’s response. Other issues could have been considered here, for example war-widows, or the plight of war-wounded soldiers once back home.

This fascinating work reveals that there are still many demographic aspects of the First World War remaining to be explored. Among the positive aspects of this study, we should underline its impassioned exploration of women’s experiences during the war, as the book focuses not only on the men who went to the front but also on the women and
their families who stayed behind. Although the book is mainly written in Romanian, there is a detailed summary in English. A basic knowledge of Transylvanian history during the Great War is desirable for a better and easier understanding. Those working on twentieth-century demography, family issues, women’s studies and military conflict, especially historians of the First World War, should find much of interest in this work.

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