

War and Society: The Impact of World War I on the Family in Transylvania

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Introduction

EVEN THOUGH the international literature specialized on World War I comprises hundreds of works on a variety of issues dealing with the “domestic front,” such as the impact of war on the civilian population or the family, and gender relations, in Romania there is no systematic research on this topic. There are few exceptions: two or three isolated studies, but insufficient if we are to assess the most important effects of war on the societal ensemble.¹ As in other territories, during World War I in Transylvania there were significant political and military, social and economic, but also cultural and mentality mutations that influenced the demographic situation of the province. The dynamics and the structure of the population in Transylvania during this period accurately mirror both the domestic and the international circumstances that caused ampler or less perceptible variations in demographic behavior. Obviously, the long war had immediate, but also medium and long term effects on the family institution in the province. In the present paper we will focus on Transylvania, which is part of today’s Romania, but was part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy until 1918.

1. The dynamic and structure of marriages

OBVIOUSLY, DURING the war there were fewer marriages because of the material shortages, and also because men were drafted. Folklore gives us very truthful and also colorful information about the dwindling number of marriages because the vast majority of young men eligible for marriage were no longer in the villages. Here is, for example, the poem *Life’s Mourn-*

ing: “The cuckoo is singing in the field/ And girls are singing sorrowfully/ Sorrowfully and longingly/ There are no lads of their age/ Beautiful girls they are/ But no one to love them/ The men are on the front/ Joy there is no more.”²

The marriage dynamic between 1913 and 1918 had the following evolution: 26,595 marriages in 1913, 19,929 in 1914, 9,351 in 1915, 8,046 in 1916, 9,466 in 1917, and 15,289 in the last year of the war.³ The most dramatic drop in the number of marriages occurred in the regions which had the most to suffer, respectively in the counties at the foot of the Southern Carpathians (Sibiu, Făgăraș etc.)⁴ Here, the number of marriages diminished drastically between 1915 and 1916, whereas in the counties of Sălaj and Solnoc, situated farther from the border with Romania, the number of marriages went slightly up.

Significant changes also took place during the war if we compare the number and the rate of marriages in the rural and the urban area. Until 1913 the marriage rate in the big cities and the rural area was almost the same. After 1914, there was an obvious difference: the number of rural marriages is way behind the marriages concluded in the urban area. The biggest difference was recorded in 1915, when the marriage rate was 6.7‰ in the urban area, whereas in the rural area it was only 2.7‰.⁵ Between 1914 and 1918, this difference was the same, namely, there was a higher “density” of marriages in the urban area compared to the realities in the villages. Such an increased intensity of marriages in the urban area compared to the number of marriages in the rural area can easily be explained. The big factories producing for the war were in the cities and a lot of young men interested in matrimony worked here. In the rural area, the majority of men, especially the single ones, but not only, were drafted.

During this period, changes occurred also in the number of marriages concluded by people of different age groups. Before 1914, most marriages were concluded by women in the 20–24 age group, followed by women in the 17–19 age group etc. During World War I, a change occurred in the number of marriages concluded by women from older age groups. Therefore, even though most marriages were still concluded by women in the 20–24 age group, the next frequent marriages were concluded by women in the 30–49 age group, then by women in the 25–29 age group, and then by women in the 17–19 age group. Also the number of women under 17 who got married dropped from 8.6% out of all the marriages concluded before the war to 3.2% out of the marriages concluded during the world war. At the same time, the number of marriages concluded by women who were in the 50–60 age group and over 60 increased from 2.1% before the war to 13.6% during the war. In close connection to the changes regarding the age groups was the change in the percentage regarding the spouses’ status before marriage. During the war, the number of *palingam* marriages (matrimonies where, at least, one of the partners has been married

before) consistently increased as young men, who before the war would generally conclude *protogam* marriages (marriages in which neither of the partners had been married before), were drafted. Thus, the percentage of *protogam* marriages dropped from 82.6% in 1913 to 70.3% in 1916. There was a slight comeback in the following years: 74.2% in 1917 and 78.1% in 1918.⁶ The increase, especially the increase in 1918, was because numerous marriages were concluded in that year in comparison to the period between 1915 and 1917. This can probably be explained by the number of soldiers who deserted towards the end of the war or returned home in November–December 1918.

Last, but certainly not least, we have to mention the change between 1913 and 1918 in the husbands' professional category. One can notice that the most visible mutations concern married men. They changed their agricultural occupation and became industrial or mining workers in order to meet the demand of work force for the war production. In these conditions, the number of married men whose main occupation was farming dropped from 63.9% in 1913 to 56.2% in 1918. The rate of married men who had occupations in industry and mining rose, during the same interval, from 17.1% to 22.1%.⁷ This tendency explains better the big percentage of marriages during the war in the urban area in comparison to the rural area. In the cities there were more men available for marriage who worked in the war industry. On the other hand, the sudden drop in the number of married men whose main occupation was agriculture, as well as the massive recruitment of peasants to the Austrian-Hungarian army, also had negative economic effects. Agricultural work in the rural area was mostly done by women, elderly people, and children. Consequently, efficiency decreased and the production of grains slowly dwindled so that towards the end of the war, hunger threatened to be a true enemy to the civilian population, but also to the army, because supplying it with adequate food became more and more difficult.

2. General aspects regarding morality during the war

IT is a general truth that war influenced the social, the economic, the political, and the military life, at a public level. It equally influenced the private life of the people, both of those who were at home and of those who were on the front. The most diverse personal and family tragedies were recorded during the war; life no longer followed its normal course. Since the draft order was published till soldiers left for the front, mothers and wives had been shedding tears anticipating the tragedies that would come and affect them during the war. In his memoirs Octavian Tăslăuanu talks about the episode from 1 August 1 1914 when he left Sibiu for Făgăraș as he had been drafted.

At the railway station, lots of people, screaming, sobbing, and crying. A peasant taking his farewell from his wife made me cry, too. It is unbelievable how difficult it is for two people who love each other to say goodbye, especially when they feel that the separation could be forever. The young peasant woman was crying so violently that her full bosom seemed like breaking and rustled like waves whipped by a storm. The strong man looked at her and kept getting off the train, in wild anger, he took her in his arms, and they both cried like children. When the train left, his comrades in sorrow kept him by force on the train. He wanted to get off and go to his wife, who was crying on her knees, her face to the ground as if she was crying after a dead man.⁸

The strength and the depth of some family relations were so profound that there were cases of women who followed their husbands to the front. Here is an example mentioned by O. Tăslăuanu.

[T]he wife of a Gypsy from Făgăraș came with us on the train up to Stanislau without being noticed by anyone. And from Stanislau she marched with us, next to her husband. She washed the soldiers' laundry, she cleaned the kitchen, and ate whatever we had. She came with us up to Stryj, where she was sent home by train, because her feet were bleeding. Before she left, she had her husband swear that he would not cheat on her with those 'whores' from Galicia.⁹

On the other hand, the war favoured behaviour and morals already present in the Transylvanian society before the beginning of the world war. One of the major problems that the church, the century-old protector of the believers' morality, had to confront was conjugal fidelity.¹⁰ In the newspapers of the time, in the official letters of the church, in the folklore recorded between the two world wars, in the memoirs of the time etc, there are clear references to the disorderly life that both the men, who were on the front, and the women, who were at home, led. Women, especially when they were young and beautiful, had to cope with the attention given to them by the men left in the village, gendarmes or war prisoners. The latter had been achievement to the rural areas to work in agriculture on the large farms. Therefore, it was rather an "sent than a usual fact that a woman kept her conjugal honor intact,"¹¹ mentions Eugenia Bârlea, a keen observer of the reality in the Romanian Transylvanian rural world during the war. Without denying the validity of this statement, we would like to add that still there were lots of such "achievements" among the women from Transylvania, either from the rural or the urban area, as plenty of women respected their conjugal fidelity.

Of course, not all men that left for the front were the champions of exemplary marital fidelity; on the contrary, numerous sources confirm the relaxed morals among the soldiers. In the newspapers, there were recurrent articles that cen-

sored such behaviour, probably because there were also an alarmingly growing number of people who caught venereal diseases. "Statistics made exactly during this on-going battle show that from the present number of military men, the Romanians give the highest percentage of people who caught worldly diseases."¹² The phenomenon was not singular; the military authorities of other combatant countries were also worried about the increasing spread of venereal diseases among the soldiers, which decreased their fighting capacity. The civil authorities in Transylvania were also worried about the proliferation of sexually transmitted diseases and drafted numerous rules in the cities to prevent the spread of venereal diseases.¹³ It was relatively a common practice among the combatant troops that they would "waste" their energy not just in the trenches but also in "occasional beds" during the recuperation time spent behind the front lines. "During the 10 days' rest we were separated into 4 groups. Each group was allowed a two-day trip to Trieste in the regiment's cart. Naturally, not everybody was into this kind of entertainment. A few went regularly, especially those who had an emotional attachment. These attachments were especially with Austrian women clerks, nurses from the hospitals, and often with dancers or escorts. All, without exception, were expensive."¹⁴ Even though the military authorities were aware of these practices, their reaction was not very firm in preventing immorality because the sexual pleasure "hunted" by the soldiers and officers compensated for the war horrors that they encountered during the fighting. Unfortunately, the occasional flings between women and soldiers or officers, who paid them for their sexual favors, contributed to these women having some extra income that helped them get by the lack of food, the restrictions and the hardships of war. Gradually, a lot of women, especially those who were young and beautiful, understood that they could accumulate money easily through such practices rather than work to physical exhaustion in the factories or on the fields.

That is why after the war many women who had tried out free love with the soldiers on leave or with soldiers during their recuperation period preferred to make their living through prostitution. For some women who had already "specialized" in this old art already during the war, continuing practicing such activities became a common thing. The feminine type described by O. Tăslăuanu is as typical as possible in this respect. "In her youth she must have been beautiful. Now her aristocratic sins—for the officers called her the baroness—gave her black circles under her eyes and wrinkles at the corners of her mouth. These signs of whoredom gave her away, but did not hinder her flirtation. Her blood was still boiling ruby-like under her smooth skin and it made her search, with an enticing look, the group of officers."¹⁵

Despite the military authorities' orders and the military priests' call for morality, immoral behaviour and marital infidelity accompanied the troops on leave

or on the front line. Such behaviour is also suggested by a scene narrated by a soldier in his memoirs. After staying at Lemberg, in Galicia, for a few weeks, he was detached, with his entire unit, to another place. At the train station “came all the Russian women and they were crying in their own language. That was when we left for Russian Poland.”¹⁶ Of course, the situation mentioned above is not singular.¹⁷ Soldiers on the front or during the calm periods, or the wounded soldiers who were in hospitals, used to have occasional affairs. These experiences could affect their moral and marital behaviour after the war had ended and also influenced their way of life. During the war many women “were forced” to turn to the soldiers of the occupying armies and become prostitutes because their own men were away and there was a lot of hunger. Therefore, besides the military brothels that were quickly improvised in areas where there were large concentrations of soldiers, there was the increasing promiscuity of women from the war zone, whose husbands had been on the front for a long time.¹⁸ Promiscuity increased not only because men had been separated from their wives for a long time, but also because the patriarchal and religious society was dismantled under the impact of war. Women cheating, drinking with soldiers, the spread of birth control, the separation between morality and sexuality etc. influenced relations between the sexes after the war.¹⁹

Another example from the memoirs of the time is very relevant for the relaxed morals during the war. It described the experience of a wounded soldier in a hospital in Budapest: “Lieutenant Tóth gave a lot of advice. An officer, a certain K.u.K was a discreet and honorable man. The ladies, some of them, had had love affairs. This was the private business of each of them, one does not take that into consideration. Instead of wandering around town looking for women, it is better to find an attachment in the hospital. Grete, the secretary, is free, young, and beautiful; she is only 24 years old and, above all, a pleasant and discreet person. During the six months I spent in hospital, she was really helpful.”²⁰

The local media also revealed materials and information from which one can get a certain perspective on one of the partners’ morality and also on the appearance of a new type of gender relations. In the issue from 17 May 1917 of *Unirea*, a newspaper of the time, there is a story entitled “Women and War.” It has two characters, Nicolae and Sinefta. They are husband and wife. The story delineates very well the relations and the two partners’ status in the household, and it also captures the image of the traditional Romanian family in Transylvania. The story begins with a remark from the husband who expresses his satisfaction for the tiring work that women now have to do during the war, while men are drafted on the front: “Now is your time! You work until you fall down. You can see for once what work is. You thought that men’s work is like yours...”²¹ The man was complaining that after a long day’s mowing, ploughing, sowing etc. he could

hardly walk home, dead tired. And if he managed to drag himself and enter the village pub, hardly had he put the bottle to his mouth when his wife showed up and started brawling him: “You swine, you bastard, you drunk! That’s how your father also died... You put the bottle down and leave. You hear me? You leave at once. Look at him the bastard. He is sitting in the pub and I have no wood cut for fire, no water and no weeds to feed the pigs...” Obviously, the man, upset that he could not take a breather after a very hard day’s work in the fields, looked down on the difficulties of household work: “Poor she, she is really tired. How can she not be tired when she has just been sitting since this morning? All women’s work is done sitting down! They spin sitting down, they sew sitting down, they cook sitting down, but still in the evening they are dead tired. What can we men say? We sow, we plough, we dig, and we work as much as a village of women”. Gradually, the man changes his interpretative registry and is obliged to admit that eventually, women managed to cope with the difficulties and do the chores that were their responsibility. “For it is not an easy thing. He has been at war for such a long time and they, poor souls, they are at home with a flock of children, the household, and the work in the fields. And when you come home once a year, you find the field sown, the corn dug, the livestock well taken care of, and the house in good shape. I am afraid that if they had been gone from home for so long and you would have been left alone at home, you could not have done what they managed to do!” From this perspective, i.e. gender relations, the traumatizing experience of war gave women more and various roles to play during the four years of war. This also gave them more confidence in their own strength that they could run, by themselves, a household and made them more aware of the value of their work and reduced their dependence on men. The experience of war changed women’s perspective on themselves and their place in society and it also changed the view of society on women.²²

A wife’s letter to her husband, who was on the front, is one of the numerous proofs which show the economic “emancipation” of the women left alone at home.

[T]hrough this letter and these few lines I bring to your attention, my dear husband, that I, your darling wife, am alive and healthy and I also wish you my sweet husband good health and may the good Lord bring you home safe. My dear husband, you should know that I received your letter from the 24th on the 1st and I understood everything you wrote to me. You should know, my dear Nicolae, that the corn is beautiful and right now I am reaping the wheat. You, my dear, should not be bothered because I went in the fields to reap as I want to make a living and in order to do that I have to be healthy, and you stay alive and you come home. Nicolae, you asked me if it had rained, my dear, it also rained heavily here and I bitter-sweetly

*remember that it's been 3 years since I have been reaping without you and I wish I were with you and if you could not come home now, maybe you will come in the autumn, and help me with the corn, and it would be so good if you could come. And you asked me about work, there's a lot of work to do and I went in the fields to dig and I did not stay home at all and I went to reap and I am dead tired because of so much work. Nicolae, I did not work as much as I do now not even when I was a servant. But this is no problem for I know that when you come home, you won't let me work anymore. I kiss you dearly, fore thee well, Nicolae.*²³

During those years of war, in the rural milieu in England or in the urban milieu in the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy, the stubborn fight of women from working class families or from the countryside to endure by themselves undermined the traditional patriarchal values. This also happened in the urban and rural milieus in Transylvania. In France, USA, Italy, Russia, and Transylvania where the rural population was 87% of the entire population before the war,²⁴ women continued to work the fields in the same traditional manner they used to, but the amount of work had to double in order to compensate for the absence of men. Of course, there are differences regarding women's activity in agriculture among the belligerent countries, but there is no doubt that the war also meant the destruction of normal gender relations, which influenced the evolution of family and behaviour in the inter-war period. This fact was admitted by Sabin Manuilă, one of the most well-known demographers in Romania at the time. He said that "the process of disorganization began for us as well".²⁵

Between 1914 and 1918, in all belligerent countries, women's work in industry, agriculture, transportation, services etc. was a daily reality and it was a fundamental contribution to the war effort of the respective country.²⁶ There is no doubt that many such women, like the heroine in the previous letter, did not easily accept a degrading status in the family after the war. And if the husband, should he have been an alcoholic or abusive man, had wanted to keep her in inferiority, she would have had the courage to get a divorce and get her life in her own hands, because the experience of the war showed her that she could manage on her own. It is not accidental that the divorce rate in Transylvania grew significantly between the years 1910 and 1930, which we associate especially with the effects of the war. The number of divorced people in the province rose from 0.23% in 1910 to 0.58% at the 1930 census.²⁷

The Orthodox metropolitan consistory from Sibiu requested from the archpriests periodical reports about the parishioners' moral state and urged the clergy to correct the believers' disciplinary deviations through their sermons. It is well known that until the war broke out, people who lived together without be-

ing married were refused communion. After 1914, the leaders of the Orthodox Church made a few “concessions” in this regard. Such couples were asked to make a promise in front of the altar, during confession, that they would redeem their mistake.²⁸ Also, the couples who wanted to change their status from living together to matrimony and asked for the religious matrimonial ceremony were regarded with more lenience. The priests did not compel them any longer to fulfill certain canonical obligations (which used to be obligatory before the war). This also happened because sometimes the soldiers who were home on leave did not have too much time to fulfill the traditional canonical obligations in order to ask forgiveness for their sins. Despite this situation, the believers’ morality did not improve too much. 1,679 marriages were recorded at the archbishopric in 1915. But the cases of couples living together outside matrimony and the cases of illegal cohabitation were twice as many as marriages. They numbered 3,633.²⁹

Obviously, the exceptional state of war influenced the decisions and attitude of the state and the church regarding the citizens and the parishioners’ morality. For example, in order to protect the morality of Arad, the military commander requested the city council to forbid the local citizens from basking in the sun, in their nudity, on the river bank of the Mureş in front of the military beach. The police also ordered that women should not be hired in restaurants or bars because this would affect the public morals.³⁰

The ecclesiastic leadership was also forced to make a choice. They could maintain their rigid policies and ask the parishioners to respect the strictness of the canon and the rules, which would lead to the estrangement from the church or they could “close” their eyes to some rules which could be broken without a lot of prejudice to the church. In the spirit of such a vision, I have to mention some of the measures taken by Metropolitan Vasile Mangra between the years 1916 and 1918. He encouraged the marriages between relatives of the 4th and 5th level in order to stimulate the birth of as many children as possible in the province. Mangra approved most of the 200 applications for such dispensations received by the metropolitan set.³¹ Often, such approved applications for dispensations were accompanied by a note that “the wedding should not be accompanied by some noisy party” in order to avoid too much “publicity” for the marriages which usually would not have been approved by the church. The same text-recommendation for a discreet wedding also accompanied the dispensations for the wedding ceremonies during the fasting periods.³² However permissive the higher hierarchy proved to be in giving such dispensations from the century-old rules of matrimony, they did not want the people to get the impression that the church was too lenient and they tried to make such dispensations pass as discreetly as possible.

The problems of the church and of the authorities from Transylvania were not unique to this oriental province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Similar issues existed in other belligerent states in Europe. When men were called to arms, a general concern spread in almost all the countries about what would happen to their homes and families. Partly, this happened because the war was justified as the defence of women and children and, implicitly, the defence of the traditional gender roles. Consequently, there were serious reasons for concern about the way the war would change these roles. A lot of European nations had public debates in the mass media or even in the legislative forums about women's behaviour. Journalists, social reformers, politicians, church leaders, and others, they all wondered how to make sure that women would not err and sin while their men were drafted on the front. As the war continued, the fear that women would lose their morality, that social problems would get more complicated, that illegitimacy would rise etc, became a priority topic. This also happened because of information then extant in the newspapers and in the public minds about the soldiers' behaviour.³³ For example, in the city of Arad, after intense pleading from restaurant owners, the police issued strict rules about hiring women in restaurants, pubs, and diners. The Honved³⁴ army headquarters in Budapest also issued such regulations about the exemption from the military service of certain categories of workers and peasants in order to do certain specific work.³⁵ The attention of the general public focused on maintaining the soldiers' morality on the front and maintaining the moral standards of those who stayed at home because in the context of total war any aspect was relevant for the general mobilization and state of mind of a world in which war had to preserve an idealized society. Not only was the enemy portrayed as being degenerate, but the nation's women were called to represent perfection and traditional morality while their husbands were sent to the front to fight.³⁶

3. The epistolary dialogue and family problems of the Romanians in Transylvania during the war

THE SOLDIERS' letters from the front as well as the women's letters from home show the complex dimensions of family relations during the war. Of course, most of the letters sent or received by the soldiers on the front were somewhat standard because of the special censorship service that checked on the information coming from or going to the war zone.³⁷ Still, information did pass in spite of the censors' vigilant eyes and it showed the difficult state of those on the front. The letters represent a very generous historical source

on the collective mentality. The memoirs of the abovementioned O. Tăslăuanu talk quite convincingly about this aspect:

We, the squad commanders, received orders to censor the soldiers' letters and sign them. At first, for me it was fun to check on the peasants' mail. Most letters were addressed to their wives at home or to their relatives, some of whom were in Romania. Even though they had orders not to do it, a lot of soldiers wrote about their troubles and described the state in Galicia with a lot of wit. From all the letters, you could sense their deep sadness, sometimes the revolt, as people would curse their destiny... A collection of letters from the battlefield would be the most precious proof of the torments of the Romanian soul under the Habsburg flags.³⁸

Most letters and postcards that I examined summarized, as one would normally expect, the family members' relations and sentiments (husband-wife-offspring-parents-in-laws) as well as various aspects of everyday life on the front or at home. Of course, marital relations were a recurrent theme; women were often looking forward to a meeting, even a brief one, in order to appease their desires and sexual longings. For instance, in the following example a woman writes to her wounded husband who was recuperating in a hospital, in Cluj. "You'd better write me a letter so that I know what you are doing and if they select you for the march company, send me a letter so that I come, because I want to come to you on May 3 so we can talk and make love..."³⁹ One can understand such an attitude if we take into consideration the fact that there were numerous wives in Transylvania who honored their marital relations and who wanted to have sexual relations with their lawful and beloved husbands after months and years of absence. Here is another example even more obvious about this aspect of marital relations and the need to satisfy one's physiological necessities, written in a very clear manner: "Domnica says you should write her a letter about when she should come to you because she misses you a lot, and she would kiss you, but you are far away, but God will help you and you would get close, and Domnica wishes you came home for a night and sleep with her in bed..."⁴⁰ Of course, in other postcards, sexual desires are more discreet, expressed in quickly improvised verses which only let you guess the sender's true intentions. "May my husband kiss me justly, may you write me a letter again, you will not write it lest I should get upset, but you write it in order to make me happy, I am kissing you now, because nobody is kissing me now."⁴¹

Obviously, in the epistolary dialogue between the husband and the wife, questions or explanations are expressed in two hypostases. They are either from the inquiring husband or from the wife telling him in standard phrases and little words about the children's situation. "Upon writing this little letter, I am

healthy, health which I wish you, too, darling wife and our little child that God gave us, and I ask you, beloved wife, please write me a letter because I miss you and our child and I am far away and I wish my father-in-law and mother-in-law, and our old mother all the best from God.⁴² Here is another letter in the same tone and with the same formulas, but written by the wife. "My darling and beloved husband, you will only hear about me that I am in good health together with the children, good health which I wish the good Lord also gave to you".⁴³ Even though direct confessions are missing for the moment, it is sure that the war was a traumatizing experience for almost all children. The absence of the father, sometimes for years, or his definitive absence because of death on the front affected the little ones, influencing their psycho-emotional development.⁴⁴ Also the parents must have become even more emotional towards their children, because men, especially those who faced death on the front, came to realize the absence and the importance of children at home.

Numerous other letters show the hardships with which the women left by themselves were confronted, how they tried to ensure the normal management of the peasant household. If women living by themselves in the urban area after the conscription of their husbands had fewer problems with survival, in the rural area life was very difficult and women got many responsibilities with which they had not had to deal until then. The following example is very relevant for the woman's new status as head of family. "And you should know that I received your postcard and I was very happy to find out that you are well and that you got closer. And you should know that the cow calved, the sheep yeaned, and you should know that we got 10 and a half stacks of hay and the weather is good and the corn is also good, but God only knows how hard it is. Having nothing else to write about, I remain your good willing wife, Ana Boer, who loves you."⁴⁵ Also, in the following letter, there is interesting information on how the wife who was on her own made sure that the household was run smoothly:

*Darling wife Maria, you should know that I received the letter from you written on October 9th and I was very happy about it as I understood that you harvested everything and finished sowing. You should write to me about the cows if you want to keep them as well as the calves, and do you have enough hay for them? You should write to me about the 30 crowns I sent you, please answer me about everything! I was happy that you wrote to me about my nephew. With these few words, I wish you good health, my wife Maria, and our dear son, and mother, and father-in-law, and mother-in-law, and my dear sister, and I kiss you all thousands of times.*⁴⁶

When the man got wounded and was in hospital, in order to diminish his physical or psychological suffering, his wife tried to encourage him and assured him

that she could manage doing by herself the household chores and the field work. This was the case of Ioan Frățilă from Găureni.

First of all, I, your wife Maria, send my most respectful greetings to you, my darling and loving husband Ionică, and ask you about your health, and I also pray to the good Lord to give you good health. My dear Ionică, I bring it to your knowledge that I finished weeding the corn, I gathered the hay in stacks and you should not worry about the house because I will do as God will help me. I beg you, please write to me about you because you are in hospital and I am worried because I do not know anything about you. And the cattle are fine and I thank you because you did not forget me.⁴⁷

The epistolary dialogue between husband and wife often includes hints as to the relations between the wives left at home and the husband's parents. Obviously, a leit-motif in such letters is the tense relation between the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law because of the parents-in-law's desire to control and direct the daughter-in-law's life and household. The man's position was often difficult. He received letters from both his mother and his wife and it was, therefore, up to him to reconcile the two women, which was not easy at all, as the next letter shows.

And I further tell you that I received a letter from mother and she did not speak well of you and I write to you, my dear Nastasia, that you should not be at odds with mother as you know very well I do not like it at all. And if you have some money, keep it, do not spend it buying pigs, because you do not know what will come and I know that pigs are expensive. And I received both letters from you and having nothing more to add, I leave you and in these few words I wish you and my mother-in-law, and Maria all the best and good health. Your loving husband George, I await your quick reply.⁴⁸

Such tense relations between the wife and the in-laws are also shown in the following case, but this time it was not the mother-in-law who was depicted negatively but the father-in-law who asked to be paid when he helped his daughter-in-law with the work in the fields:

Oh my good Lord, why did they separate us. And my good Lord when will there be peace on Earth? And if only we lived together one or two more years and then I wished I died lest I should have to face so many hardships and I have been through so many troubles and I could still cope with a lot if only I knew you would not die over there. Our good Lord will help us and maybe you will be alright, dear husband,

and I beg you write me back how many letters you got from me because I got 5 from you before the postcard that came a week after you sent me the fifth letter and please write back. And your father came and flailed the rye and wanted you to pay him and I do not have the maney to pay him.⁴⁹

In general and not just during the war, the daughter-in-law's relations with her in-laws were not the most cordial, especially when the daughter-in-law wanted to emancipate herself from the heavy guardianship of the mother-in-law who wanted to have her own way in the management of her married children's household. Harmonizing the relations between the two generations, which were usually tense, was not at all easy especially in the rural families, but not only.

Paradoxically, the war, instead of uniting families affected by the tragedy of a son/husband leaving for the front, only emphasized and exacerbated certain relations between the daughter-in-law and her in-laws. The husband's parents wished to be more and more involved in the household of the son who had left for the front. And this was somehow normal up to a point. However, their insistence and rigidity often led to worse relations. This was an aspect very well represented in the letters that came from the front and left for the front, but also in the folklore of that time.

Conclusion

WORLD WAR I caused mutations of the family and gender relations which were surely more ample than we managed to outline in this paper. We did not intend to tackle exhaustively all the problems generated by influence of war on matrimonial behaviour, but rather we made an inventory of the main demographic mutations which occurred during that period and were immediately visible or had sequential manifestations after World War I. The natural growth of the population was undoubtedly affected the most. The birth rate and the marriage rate evolved in the most dramatic way. Also, the death rate was influenced by the social, economic, political, and military circumstances of the time. Marriage and the couple's morality were visibly influenced by war as people reacted in complex ways to the challenges of the new circumstances of everyday life on the front and also at home. The population's increased mobility, especially the increased mobility of those who were on the front during those years, was such that it contributed to the "contamination" of a large segment of population with habits, beliefs, and feelings which would hardly have been seen during normal circumstances, during peace and in a traditional frame of mentality. The war emphasized a tendency towards dissolution in

the first years of the interwar period. Later on, family relations became stronger. The oscillation of the divorce rate in the first decade after the war is relevant in this respect. Therefore, in 1921 the divorce rate was 1.2‰. This was the highest rate. In 1922 it went down to 1.1‰, in 1923 it was 1.0‰, and between 1924 and 1929 it stayed at 0.9‰. In 1930 and several other years afterwards it dropped to 0.8‰.⁵⁰ After the torment created by the war had gradually been “annihilated,” Transylvanian society went back to normal, more or less. Patriarchy and the usual values of masculinity recovered their traditional importance, especially in the rural areas.⁵¹



Notes

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1. Maria Bucur, “Între mituri, icoane și tăceri. Femeile române în primul război mondial,” in *Cine suntem noi? Despre identitatea femeilor din România modernă* (coord. Mădălina Nicolaescu), Bucharest, 1996, p. 40–50; Daniela Popescu, “Mișcarea feministă în anii Primului Război Mondial,” in *Omagiu istoricului Dan Berindei*, Focșani, 2001, p. 214–223; Mirela Chioveanu, “Romanian Women during the Great War,” in *La Roumanie et la Grande Guerre*, ed. Dumitru Ivănescu and Sorin D. Ivănescu, Iași, 2005, p.229–248;
 2. Vasile Savel, *Doine din nășboiu și câteva povestiri*, Arad, 1925, p. 27.
 3. *A Magyar Szent Korona Országainak 1913–1918. évi népmozgalma*, in *Magyar Statisztikai Közlemények. Új sorozat*, LXX kötet.
 4. Cornel Todea, “Contribuții la cunoașterea demografiei istorice a Transilvaniei,” in *Revista de Statistică*, 22, nr. 6, 1973, p. 85.
 5. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
 6. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
 7. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
 8. Octavian C. Taslauanu, *Trei luni pe câmpul de bătaie. Ziarul unui român, ofițer în armata austro-ungară, care a luat parte, cu glotașii români din Ardeal, la luptele din Galiciia*, Bucharest, 1915, p. 15.
 9. *Ibidem*, p. 87
 10. Eugenia Bârlea, *Perspectiva lumii rurale asupra Primului Război Mondial*, Cluj-Napoca, 2004, p. 126.
 11. *Ibid.*; the verses that were popular in a village in Hațeg (Hunedoara county) between the two world wars are relevant for the implosion of traditional morality: “A ha ha, my husband/ In Galicia is your place/ Not hitting my head with your fists/ In Galicia is your place/ Not hitting my head with your fists./ Keep the war going, my good Lord/Let my pension keep coming/ And let me spend time with my man” apud. Ion Conea, *Clopotiva, un sat din Hațeg*, vol. I, Bucharest, 1935, p. 302.

12. Eugenia Bârlea, *Perspectiva lumii rurale*, p. 127.
13. Jean-Yves Le Naour, "Sur le front intérieur du péril vénérien (1914–1918)," in *Annales de démographie historique*, 2002, nr. 1, p. 107 sqq; National Archive for Arad County, Police Files, file 310/1916, f. 1–2 (hereinafter NAAC).
14. Coriolan Băran, *Reprivire asupra vieții: Memorii*, Arad, 2009, p. 117.
15. Octavian C. Tăslăuanu, *Hora obuzelor*, Bucharest, 1916, p. 43.
16. Valeriu Leu, Carmen Albert, *Banatul în memorialistica "măruntă" sau istoria ignorată (1914–1919)*, Reșița, 1995, p. 25. Octavian Tăslăuanu speaks in his memoirs of a similar case in Galitia: "In the village we were leaving there were only women. It broke your heart to see them crying in sobs..." *Trei luni pe câmpul de bătaie*, p. 118.
17. "Our battalion would stop exactly at the northern edge of the village. In the yards appeared rosy and well-built Ukrainian women happy to see new soldiers..." according to Octavian C. Tăslăuanu, *Hora obuzelor*, p. 8. The same author narrates another episode relevant in this respect. He had been wounded and he sent his orderly to look for the coachman soldier that was to take him to the camp hospital. But the coachman had "befriended a Ukrainian woman and was drinking with her in a pub. Life had enmeshed both of them in love's net," *ibid.*, p. 35.
18. Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction. Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War*, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 247.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 251.
20. Coriolan Băran, *Reprivire asupra vieții*, p. 134.
21. *Unirea*, 27, no. 26, 17 May 1917.
22. Diana Condell, Jean Liddiard, *Working for Victory? Images of women in the First World War, 1914–1918*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1987, p. 2 sq.
23. National State Archives, Cluj Brancg, *World War I Letters Collection*, file VII/551, f. 286–286v (called DJCAN from now on).
24. Susan R. Grayzel, *Women and the First World War*, Longman, Pearson Education Limited, 2002, p. 43; Ioan Bolovan, *Transilvania între Revoluția de la 1848 și Unirea din 1918. Contribuții demografice*, Cluj-Napoca, 2000, p. 77.
25. Sabin Manuilă, "Aspectele demografice în epoca 1921–1933," in *Mișcarea populației României în anul 1933*, Bucharest, p. 11
26. Susan R. Grayzel, *Women and the First World War*, p. 41.
27. *Recensământul din 1910. Transilvania*, coord. Traian Rotariu, Ed. Staff, Bucharest, 1999, p. 600; *Recensământul general al populației României din 29 decembrie 1930*, vol. I, Bucharest, 1938, p. XXIV.
28. Marius Eppel, *Un mitropolit și epoca sa. Vasile Mangra (1850–1918)*, Cluj-Napoca, 2006, p. 403.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 403.
30. NAAC, file 281/1916, f. 1, file X4/1916, f. 1.
31. Marius Eppel, *Un mitropolit*, p. 403 sq.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 404.
33. Susan R. Grayzel, *Women and the First World War*, p. 62
34. Hungarian foot soldiers in the Austrian-Hungarian army (translator's note).
35. DJAAN, dosar 61/1916, 314/1916 etc.

36. Susan R. Grayzel, *Women and the First World War*, p. 62.
37. Călin Marinescu, *Cenzura poștală militară în România, 1814–1940 (cenzura corespondenței civile)*, Bucharest, 2004, p. 242.
38. Octavian C. Tăslăuanu, *Trei luni pe câmpul de bătaie*, p. 121.
39. NAAC, file VII/551, f. 301.
40. Ibid. file VII/550, f. 191–191v.
41. Ibid., file VII/550, f. 194–194v.
42. Ibid., file VII/537, f. 1.
43. Ibid., file VII/548, f.1.
44. Ioana Elena Ignat, “Perspectivă generală asupra vieții copiilor din satele transilvănene în Primul Război Mondial,” in *Sub semnul istoriei. De la debut spre consacrare*, coord. Nicolae Emilian Bolea, Oana Mihaela Tămaș, Cluj-Napoca, 2009, p. 247.
45. NAAC, file VII/548, f. 1.
46. Ibid., file VII/531, f. 5–5v.
47. Ibid., file VII/551, f. 284.
48. Ibid., file VII/535, f. 1–1v.
49. DJCAC, file VII/551, f. 10–10v.
50. *Mișcarea populației României în anul 1933*, Bucharest, s.a., p. 8.
51. For present day Romania see also Mihaela Frunză, “Who’s Afraid of Feminism in Romania? Misconceptions, prejudices, stereotypes,” in *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, no. 14, Summer 2006, pp. 83–87.

Abstract

In Romania there is no systematic research on this topic. There are few exceptions, but insufficient if we are to assess the most important effects of war on the societal ensemble. In the present paper we will focus on Transylvania, which is part of today’s Romania, but was part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy until 1918. The war, instead of uniting families affected by the tragedy of a son/husband leaving for the front, only emphasized and exacerbated certain relations between the daughter-in-law and her in-laws. The husband’s parents wished to be more and more involved in the household of the son who had left for the front. And this was somehow normal up to a point. However, their insistence and rigidity often led to worse relations. This was an aspect very well represented in the letters that came from the front and left for the front, but also in the folklore of that time. Marriage and the couple’s morality were visibly influenced by war as people reacted in complex ways to the challenges of the new circumstances of everyday life on the front and also at home. The population’s increased mobility, especially the increased mobility of those who were on the front during those years, was such that it contributed to the “contamination” of a large segment of population with habits, beliefs, and feelings which would hardly have been seen during normal circumstances, during peace and in a traditional frame of mentality. The war emphasized a tendency towards dissolution in the first years of the interwar period. Later on, family relations became stronger. The oscillation of the divorce rate in the first decade after the war is relevant in this respect. After the torment created by the war had gradually been “annihilated,” Transylvanian society went back to normal, more or less. Patriarchy and the usual values of masculinity recovered their traditional importance, especially in the rural areas.

Keywords

World War I, Romania-Transylvania, family, gender relations