

# “Recovering the Wounds of War”

## Transylvanian Soldiers and their Families during and After the First World War

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Officers and soldiers of Infantry Regiment 63, 17 September 1915.

SOURCE: National Archives of Romania, Photo library collection, Album 324, f. 50 ([https://www.flickr.com/photos/arhivelenationale/23496114888/in/album-7215768\\_72357\\_09193](https://www.flickr.com/photos/arhivelenationale/23496114888/in/album-7215768_72357_09193)).

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### The First World War and Many of its Unknown Facets

**I**N AN article written in 2014, suggestively entitled “Lessons of World War One,” Professor V. A. Zolotarev of Moscow State University quotes a statistic about war, noting that over the past 35 centuries the period of peace lasted for only 300 years. During the remainder of this time, more than 14,500 wars took place, resulting in 3,540 million deaths.<sup>1</sup> World War I also contributed to this tragic statistic; during the four years and 106 days of conflict, over 10 million were killed on the battlefield while millions more succumbed to death from famine and epidemics. Moreover, this war left a legacy of 20 million invalids and millions of widows and orphans.<sup>2</sup>

The statistical data from the end of the conflict showed that the countries most affected were: Germany (1,850,000 dead), Russia (1,700,000 dead), Austria-Hungary (1,540,000

dead), France (1,325,000 dead), Serbia (1,325,000 dead), Italy (750,000 dead), the United Kingdom (744,000 dead), Romania (250,000 dead) and the United States of America (125,000 dead).<sup>3</sup>

Transylvania, part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy until 1918, also suffered extreme hardship during the war: evidence from 1922 documented around 41,739 deaths on the battlefield, 11,275 deaths in prisons and hospitals, 25,406 invalids, 79,226 orphans, and 38,630 widows.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond these reasonably accurate estimates, a number of other aspects relating to the First World War are still unknown, as research and scientific publications have focused primarily on the causes which led to conflict in Western Europe. In fact, many historians have highlighted this aspect, stating that ignorance of many of the realities of the First World War was prevalent in almost all the states that were part of the former Austro-Hungarian monarchy.<sup>5</sup> This was reiterated by Maureen Healy, who wrote of the “neglected Habsburg monarchy” and how “there is a lot we do not know. There are many stones still unturned: from conditions in Galicia to Croatia, from Trieste to Transylvania.”<sup>6</sup> Jay Winter, a specialist on World War One, drew attention to the fact that although around 10 million men in uniform fought on the Eastern Front, in most cases their stories were never told. In fact, this is the largest group of unknown soldiers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup>

## Steps Towards Recovering Numerous Unknown Aspects of the Great War in Transylvania

**A**N ANALYSIS of the Romanian historiography, with a specific focus on Transylvania during the First World War, reveals similar gaps in knowledge with regard to aspects of the conflict that took place between 1914 and 1918. By studying the historiography of the years before the fall of the communist regime, it is clear that they focused on the history of the masses, underlining national sentiment, which served to glorify Nicolae Ceaușescu.<sup>8</sup> After 1989, we witness a period of liberalization in Romanian historical writing, which led to greater transparency on the circumstances related to the First World War in Transylvania. There are written works focusing on those who fought on the front line,<sup>9</sup> but also on those on the home front,<sup>10</sup> highlighting the consequences of war in the context of socio-demographic and family relations.<sup>11</sup>

Less specific research was carried out on the plight of invalids, orphans and widows of the First World War, either in the form of Western scientific publications,<sup>12</sup> or of works from Eastern Europe. Most of the research papers on the

invalids, orphans and war widows in Transylvania were case studies, based on a particular area or locality.<sup>13</sup>

The limited knowledge of the suffering in Transylvania during and after the First World War can be supplemented by information from archive collections, such as data on the pensions given to invalids, orphans, and war widows.

A particularly generous collection has been identified amongst the historical data in the Romanian National Archives, Bistrița-Năsăud County Directorate, and is preserved under inventory numbers 618 and 805. From a total of 8,772 archive units, The Invalids, Orphans and War Widows (IOWW) Bistrița archival collection, 1918–1961, made possible the first database for these social categories created by the First World War. The database on Invalids, Orphans and Widows (IOW) has been developed by Elena Crinela Holom and Angela Cristina Lumezeanu, within the Center for Population Studies, and is still an ongoing project.<sup>14</sup>

The process of including information into the database is extremely laborious and time consuming. So far, we have put in a total of 132 files in the table relating to invalids, 700 files pertaining to widows, 82 under the category of orphans, as well as data relating to 1,337 individual children.

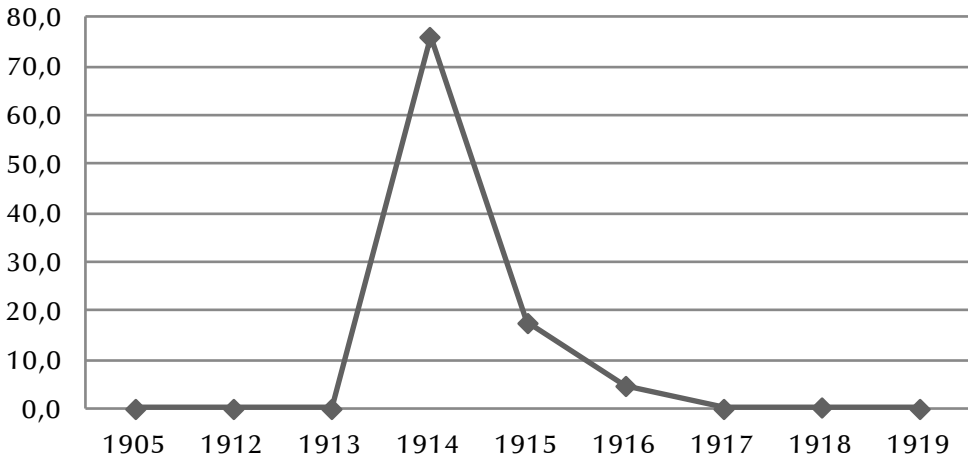
The information contained in the database makes possible a wide range of scientific investigations, but the focus of this research is to uncover the life experiences of the people of Transylvania during and after the First World War, as well as reveal some unknown facets of the conflict. Since the data in the table relating to the widows were the most consistent so far, the research has focused solely on this group. The 700 files selected originated from 51 localities in the current Bistrița-Năsăud County, covering mainly the southern and central-eastern regions.

## Participation in the War

**S**HORTLY AFTER the Austro-Hungarian Empire declared war on Serbia (28 July 1914), general conscription for all men up to the age of 42 was decreed on 1 August 1914. Subsequently, the recruitment of men born in 1892, 1893, 1894 and 1895 was ordered in mid-September. Finally, between October and November, a new directive was given for the conscription of men within the 24–36 age group. The information in the database showed that most of the soldiers (76.1%) were called to arms in 1914, during one of the waves of mobilization organized that year (graph 1).

If, in general, the elite and the Transylvanian political class supported the decision to declare war on Serbia, demonstrating loyalty and a profound sense

GRAPH 1. YEAR OF ENLISTMENT IN THE ARMY (%)



SOURCE: Invalids, Orphans and Widows Database (IOW).

of duty to Emperor Franz Joseph, the call to arms shattered the daily lives of the rest of the people.<sup>15</sup> The mobilization generated feelings of sadness, anxiety and profound uncertainty. Thus, the memoirs of the priest in the village Șanț of spoke of “houses full of mourning, 8–10 children without anyone to feed them, the land no longer tilled, food and money completely inexistent.”<sup>16</sup>

Starting with mid-February 1915, men belonging to the 18–20 age group were conscripted, followed in early May by new enlistments for men aged 17–50. In June, men up to the age of 50 were also conscripted. At the end of October, men from the 18–22 age group were called to arms and between the end of October and the end of December, those born between 1873 and 1897 were also recruited.<sup>17</sup> As a result of these drafts of 1915, 17.7% of the husbands of women about whom we have information in the database were mobilized and sent to the front line.

Regarding the impact of the men’s departure to war, several testimonies from 1915 invoke the lack of any workforce in agriculture, as most of those responsible for providing for their families had been sent to war and “did not wield agricultural implements, but weapons.”<sup>18</sup>

The unfavorable consequences of the war on villages in Bistrița are discussed in the chronicle of the parish of Șieul Mare, kept by the priest David Rusu. In his entry of 21 May 1915, he stated the following: “Besides this Great War, the country still struggles with a war within, for everything is so expensive. Perhaps, as the elders say, only during the great famines it was like this.”<sup>19</sup> The priest concludes his observations on the difficult state of affairs by invoking divine support, hoping that the war would end: “Dear Lord, please bring peace on

Earth, make the cannons and the waste cease once and for all, and also the cries of the widows and orphans left behind by their parents who died on the plains of Galicia, Serbia, Eastern Prussia, and Russian Poland."<sup>20</sup>

The enlistment process continued in 1916: between the end of February and the beginning of March, men up to the age of 50 were sent to war. In mid-April, the men born in 1898 were enlisted, followed, in mid-May, by men between 18 and 38 years of age. Even those who were less fit were sent to war. In mid-August, men between the ages of 18 and 22 were called to arms, and at the end of the month, those between 17 and 55 years of age. During the last month of the year, men aged between 18 and 24 were conscripted. A testimony from the village of Poiana Ilvei captures the fundamental impact of these massive conscriptions:

*from the middle of 1916, in the village there were left only women, children and the young ones who were not 18 yet, the old ones, over 50, and those who were aged between 19 and 50 and were not fit for war (blind, lame, deaf-mute, the sick of all kinds). Neither were they allowed to live their sufferings quietly, as they were subjected to various check-ups by the military authorities. Thus, the commission of 18 May 1916, from 19 villagers (aged 19–40), checked those considered inappropriate until now, and sent two sick brothers to the front . . .*<sup>21</sup>

With regard to the soldiers about whom we have information in the database, the information analyzed showed that the percentage of those enlisted in 1916 was 4.9.

At the beginning of January 1917, men aged 18–24 were conscripted and in August, those aged between 18 and 50 were sent to war. In September, men aged 18–21 were conscripted, and in early January 1918, those aged 19–24. In mid-April, men ranging in age from 19–24 were conscripted.<sup>22</sup>

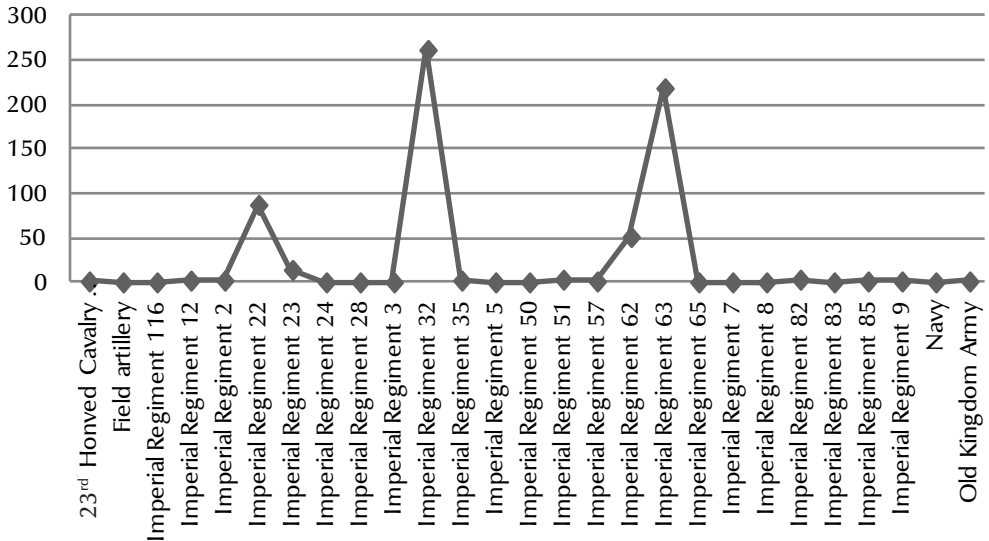
The information entered so far in the database has recorded that 0.2% of men were conscripted into the army in 1917, and during the last year of the war 0.5% of men were sent to the front line.

The majority of those who were sent to war ended up in one of the two military units that had territorial competence in the area, namely Infantry Regiment 32 (262 cases), with the garrison at Dej, and Infantry Regiment 63 (219 cases), with the garrison at Bistrița (graph 2).

Regiment 63 was the successor of the former Second Romanian Border Regiment (1762–1851), the recruitment base still being represented by roughly the same 40 communes, the men within them being former border guards.<sup>23</sup>

At the beginning of the war, Battalions 2, 3, and 4 of Regiment 63 fought in Galicia; their first battle was at Złoczów (26 August 1914). In September,

GRAPH 2. ARMY UNIT OF SERVICE



SOURCE: Invalids, Orphans and Widows Database (IOW).

the regiment took part in the battle of Chyrów. From December 1914 until March 1915 the regiment settled on the Bratków–Potok–Zajączków line along the Pilica River. At the end of May 1915, Regiment 63 was moved to Jarosław, being integrated into the Sixth German Army, led by Field Marshal August von Mackensen. From Jarosław, Regiment 63 arrived near the Chotyniec–Kalników battle line, participating in the battles of Horodisko and Wolica.

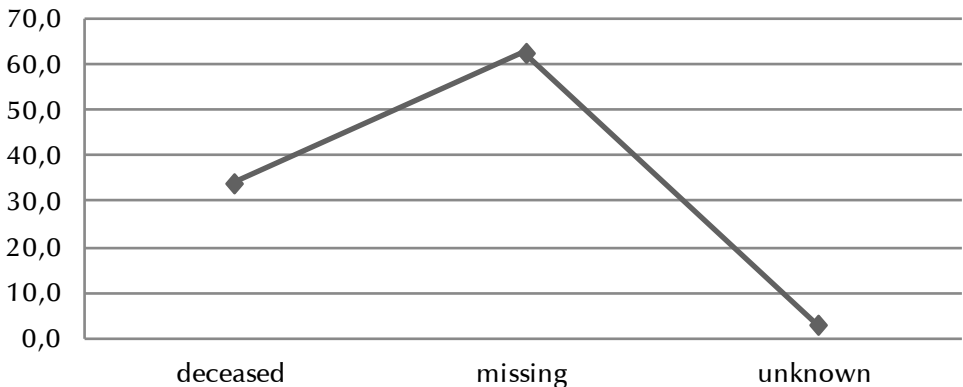
At the end of August 1915, when the Austro-German army succeeded in forcing the Russian army to retreat, Regiment 63 left the Mackensen army corps and moved to Eastern Galicia, where it remained until October–November 1915, after which time it relocated to Russian Poland, along the Serwec and Berezina rivers. At the end of May 1917, the regiment was moved to the Hermada area of Italy, participating in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Battles of Isonzo. In December 1917, Regiment 63 was quartered in Vidor, Italy, and was later relocated to the Verdun region, under German army command.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of Regiment 63, established in Mostar in 1908, fought at the beginning of World War One on the Serbian front until May 1915, when it was moved to the Italian front, where it reunited with the rest other battalions of Regiment 63, with which it moved to the French front. Survivors of the battles on the French front line headed home on 2 November 1918, arriving in Bistrița on 6 December.<sup>24</sup>

**“So much death among people and so many poor children that will be left behind by this cruel war . . .”**

**W**HETHER THEY were part of Regiment 63 or other army units, the information processed in the database revealed that in 62.7% of cases of soldiers declared missing, 34.1% were presumed dead, while little information existed regarding the fate of the others (graph 3).

GRAPH 3. SOLDIERS’ SITUATION DURING THE WAR (%)



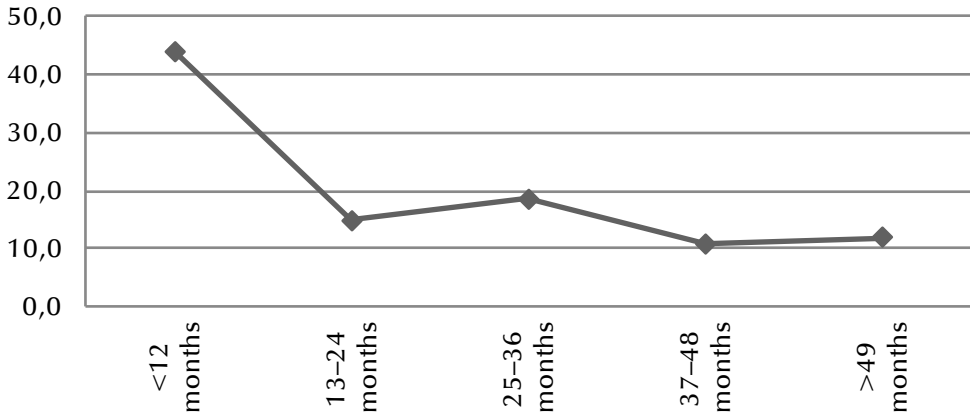
SOURCE: Invalids, Orphans and Widows Database (IOW).

A simple evaluation of the period between conscription in the army and the soldier’s disappearance/death shows that most cases occurred during the first 12 months of enlistment, the worst battle theater by far being Galicia (graph 4). This was also supported by wartime testimonies stating that “Galicia was the worst theater of war. How many of our sons shed their blood on the plains of Galicia and Bukovina, only God knows!”<sup>25</sup>

The average age of the men at the time of disappearance/death was 34.4 years, while for women the average age of those left behind by their husbands was 30.1 years (table 1). The tragic impact of the war, even though the total extent of the casualties was still unknown, was anticipated by the Orthodox priest of Șieul Mare. On 2 March 1917, he stated that “there will be more and more misfortunes upon us and sacrifices brought on our behalf to those left back home, and so much death among people and so many poor children that will be left behind by this cruel war . . .”<sup>26</sup>

The deceased or missing men left behind 700 widows and 1,312 children. In 120 cases the widows did not have children, 197 of them had 1 child, and 174 widows had 2 children (graph 5).

GRAPH 4. PERIOD BETWEEN ENLISTMENT AND DEATH/DISAPPEARANCE OF SOLDIERS (MONTHS, %)



SOURCE: Invalids, Orphans and Widows Database (IOW).

TABLE 1. MEAN AGE OF MALES ON DISAPPEARANCE/DEATH  
AND MEAN AGE OF WIVES ON DISAPPEARANCE/DEATH OF HUSBANDS

Gender	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
Males	422	20	62	34.42	6.160
Females	425	15	55	30.12	6.350

SOURCE: Invalids, Orphans and Widows Database (IOW).

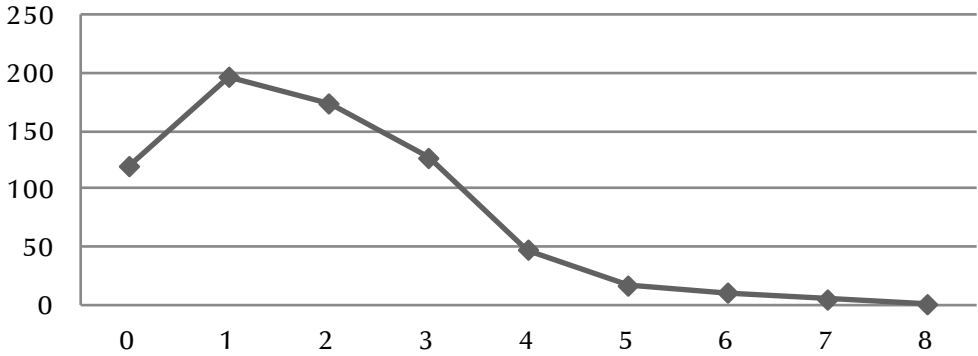
The data indicates that 54.7% of children were between the ages of 7 and 12 at the time of the death/disappearance of their father, whereas 36.9% were between 13 and 18 years of age (graphs 6).

At the end of the First World War, the Ruling Council of Transylvania and the central authorities in Bucharest issued a series of regulations and laws to support the people in need. With regard to widows and orphaned children, the most important legal measures and norms were issued on 7 June 1919, 25 August 1919, and 2 September 1920 resulting in the Law for the establishment of the National Office of Invalids, Orphans, and War Widows. Also on 2 September 1920, the directive on amending the Law for the reformation and the retirement of lower ranks of 1916 was passed, followed by the Rules for the operation of the National Office for Invalids, Orphans and Widows and for the organization and development of national assistance works on 29 April 1922.<sup>27</sup>

Regarding the material support for the widows and children of the dead or missing in battle or for those suffering other war-related hardships, the most important regulation was that issued on 2 September 1920, which aimed at

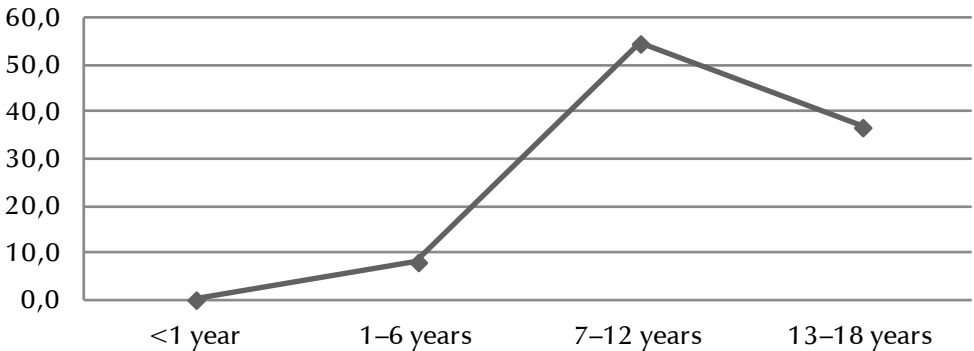


GRAPH 5. NUMBER OF ORPHANED CHILDREN



SOURCE: Invalids, Orphans and Widows Database (IOW).

GRAPH 6. AGE OF CHILDREN AT THE TIME OF FATHER DEATH/DISAPPEARANCE (%)



SOURCE: Invalids, Orphans and Widows Database (IOW).

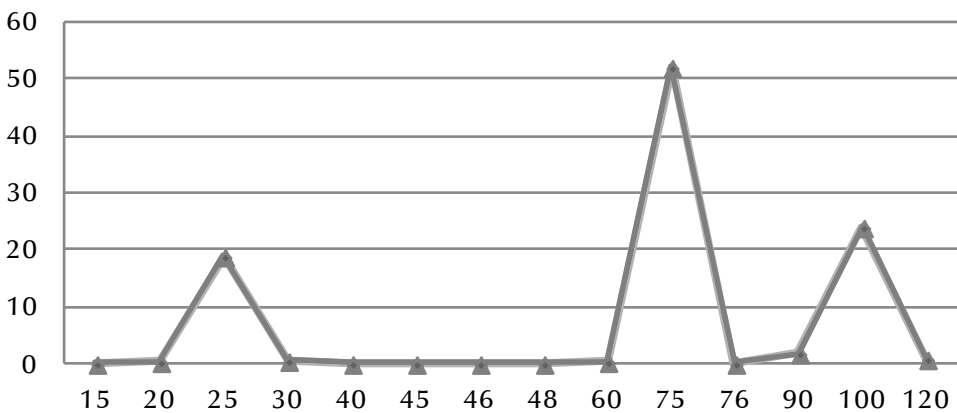
amending the law for the reformation and retirement of the lower army ranks. Article 27 of this law specified that the widows and children of soldiers and corporals were classified as first-class pensioners and would receive 50 lei if the widows had no children, 75 lei if the widow had one or two children in their care, and 100 lei if the widow was left with three or more orphaned children. The pensions of widows of army sergeants were slightly higher: the widows received 60 lei if they had no children, 90 lei if they had one or two children in their care, and 120 lei if they had three or more children. The widow received the full pension until the youngest child, irrespective of sex, became an adult, after which time the pension was reduced by half.<sup>28</sup>

Articles 40, 41, and 42 of the same law also stipulated the granting of interim financial aid until the final pension was obtained. Referred to as “subsistence

aid,” it was equal to the value of the final pension, according to the law. Finally, article 43 stipulated the applicability of the provisions of this law, which also included soldiers who had suffered from the events of the First World War in foreign armies but became Romanian citizens after the union of 1918.<sup>29</sup>

Regarding the financial benefits that widows received as a consequence of the death or disappearance of their spouse, the information analyzed in the database showed that most of them (52%) received 75 lei, whereas 24% received the sum of 100 lei (graph 7).

GRAPH 7. AMOUNT OF THE PENSION RECEIVED BY WIDOWS (%)



SOURCE: Invalids, Orphans and Widows Database (IOW).

Although the granting of benefits to help those who suffered during the war was stipulated in several legal measures and norms, the process of claiming those benefits was particularly complicated throughout the entire interwar period. The delay in receiving the final pension was mainly due, on the one hand, to the lack of bureaus dealing with this issue and, on the other hand, to the difficulty in obtaining official proof of widow status. In fact, a report made public 18 months after the National Office of Invalids, Orphans, and War Widows was established, showed that around 40% of widows, many of whom were from Transylvania, were still not receiving the appropriate pension. The provisional aid they benefited from was sometimes lower than the statutory retirement pension, which caused dissatisfaction.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, there seem to have been situations where the women did not receive any help at all from the Romanian state, as was the case with Maria Lăcătuș from Ragla. In her letter to the prefect of the county dated 6 May 1920 she said that she did not know anything about the fate of her husband, whether he was alive or not and asked for “a small pension, as I am deprived of everything, I pay rent, I must buy food, wood, oil, salt, goods, so I

have nothing and everything is expensive; besides, I'm still sick, I have only lived close to my husband, and now my husband is missing and I cannot cope with the world. Please give me an answer, as since we have been under Romanian rule I have not gotten anything, before this I used to receive 18 florins per month and I was pleased with that."<sup>31</sup> The problems and difficulties encountered in everyday life may have prompted women to rebuild their lives with a new partner—17.1% of the widows whose cases we analyzed embarked upon new relationships.

## Conclusions

**A**LTHOUGH MORE than 100 years have passed since the events of the First World War, there are still unknown facts relating to the conflict. Research and scholarly productions still have a lot to recover, especially if we are strictly referring to those who suffered. However, documents kept in archives help to fill in any blanks and describe the sense of loss and appalling consequences of World War One. Although much work is needed, this material in the archives helps clarify key facts and makes it easier to obtain information. Thus, the details included in the database on invalids, orphans, and widows of the First World War in Transylvania, although still limited both geographically and numerically, has demonstrated that it is possible to uncover and reconstruct a series of experiences from the lives of people from the past, men, women and children.

It was possible to piece together these war experiences on the basis of the information extracted from the table related to the widows, the analyzed data showing the early enlistment of a huge number of soldiers, their participation in the military operations of Galicia, Russia and the Western Front, as well as their tragic destiny (disappearance or death).

Finally, the examination of the postwar situation has shown that a large number of women and young children were left without support, as a result of the disappearance or death of the head of their family. The data processed also showed the actual amounts of money received by families of the missing or dead, as well as the life decisions made by women (remarriages).

From a rather exploratory point of view, our research helps identify key facts by analyzing information from the newly created database. In the near future, we hope to expand the database on invalids, orphans, and widows of the First World War in Transylvania, both in terms of numbers and of a wider geographic coverage. We expect that, as the database grows, the information contained within it will make possible extensive, detailed studies, capable of offering a greater insight into the life experiences of many anonymous people of Transylvania during the period of the First World War and in its aftermath.



## Notes

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2. Ibid.
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5. Gregor Joseph Kranjc, "The Neglected War: The Memory of World War I in Slovenia," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 22, 2 (2009): 208–210.
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10. Oana Habor, "Epidemiile, episoade din istoria Transilvaniei în timpul Marelui Război," in *Primul Război Mondial*, 465–476.
11. Levente Pakot, "Populaţia comitatului Odorhei în perioada Primului Război Mondial," in *Mişcări de populaţie şi aspecte demografice în România în prima jumătate a secolului XX: Omagiu academicianului Camil Muşeşanu la împlinirea vârstei de 80 de ani: Lucrările conferinţei internaţionale "Mişcări de populaţie în Transilvania în timpul celor două războaie mondiale," Cluj-Napoca, 24–27 mai 2006*, eds. Sorina Paula Bolovan, Ioan Bolovan, Rudolf Gräf, and Corneliu Pădurean (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2007), 115–130; Sorina Bolovan and Ioan Bolovan, "Demographic Phenomenon and Behaviour in Transylvania during World War I," *Romanian Journal of Population Studies* 1, 1–2 (2007): 164–180; id., "The Impact of World War I on the Family in Transylvania,"

- in *Families in Europe between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century: From the Traditional Model to the Contemporary* PACS, eds. Antoinette Fauve Chamoux and Ioan Bolovan (Cluj-Napoca: Cluj University Press, 2009), 611–628; Ioana Elena Ignat, “Some Demographic and Socio-economic Aspects of Transylvania’s Participation in the First World War,” *Research and Science Today* 2 (6) (2013): 18–25; Bogdan Crăciun, “Families in the War: The Impact of First World War on the Demographic Behaviour in the Rural World of Transylvania,” *Romanian Journal of Population Studies* 7, 2 (2013): 43–61.
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  14. For more information about the sources, the structure and content of the database, see Angela Lumezeanu, “Digital Infrastructure for Social History: Building Historical Databases,” Ph.D. thesis, Cluj-Napoca, Doctoral School Population Studies and History of Minorities, 2019, 204–224.
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  16. Apud Holom and Crăciun, 562.
  17. *Ibid.*, 562–563.
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29. Ibid., 4154.
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## Abstract

“Recovering the Wounds of War”: Transylvanian Soldiers and their Families during and After the First World War

More than a century after the end of the First World War, a series of aspects related to the horrors of the conflict are still unknown, a situation that is felt even more acutely in the states that were part of the former Austro-Hungarian monarchy. As far as Transylvania is concerned, documents kept in archives help provide missing information and describe the sense of loss and the tragic impact of the First World War. The Invalids, Orphans and War Widows (IOWW) archival collection of Bistriţa has been the starting point for compiling the first database on these social categories created by the war in Transylvania. The preliminary results of the information analyzed from the table relating to the widows highlighted the vast numbers of soldiers conscripted in the early stages of the war, their participation in the military operations in Galicia, Russia and on the Western Front, as well as their tragic destiny (disappearance or death). The data analyzed have also shown that a large number of women and young children were left behind, and shed light on the life decisions made by women (remarriages) following the disappearance/death of their husbands.

## Keywords

Transylvania, First World War, Invalids, Orphans and Widows Database, pensions, remarriage