
P A R A D I G M S

The Impact of the Great War on Demographic Events in Transylvania

DANIELA MÂRZA

The war disrupted the family's natural rhythms, which ensured both the perpetuation of future generations and the transmission of specific cultural values.

WORLD WAR I greatly affected family structures, both in the years of the conflict and in the following decades—the loss of human lives, the decline in birth rates, the increase in mortality, the ravages of epidemics, emigration, population movements, the increase in the number of widows and orphans.¹ There were imbalances in the number of men and women, as well as in age distribution; postwar reconstruction became the task of an aging active population, diminished by losses on the battlefield; the dramatic decline in birth rates caused economic and social damage, the effect of which was felt for decades.² The Great War determined, thus, significant changes in the practices and behaviors of individuals.

Due to the 100th anniversary of the great conflagration, researchers have raised the issue of its impact on the affected population. Currently, hundreds of studies and volumes are available on general population trends

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in the regions affected by the war, or on specific issues. Chief among them are some thematic numbers of prestigious magazines: *Annales de démographie historique* 1 (103)(2002), entitled “La Population dans la Grande Guerre” (which brings together articles on the causes of mortality both on and off the battlefields, on the effect of migration, epidemics and diseases on population etc.); *Journal of the International Society for First World War Studies* 5, 1 (2014), entitled “Humanitarianism in the Era of the First World War,” dedicated to the humanitarian dimension of the war, to the victims (wounded, widows, orphans, veterans) and to social assistance measures.

Most of these studies address issues with the strongest and most visible impact. The causes of mortality in the years of the war, besides those strictly related to the battlefields, were thoroughly researched, highlighting the impact of material deprivations, diseases and epidemics, of the poor general condition of the population.³ The notion of “war losses” has been extended from fallen soldiers to all population losses due to declining birth rates and civilian deaths.⁴

The population of the states involved in the war was also affected by complex phenomena, with multiple causes and consequences, such as migration, deportation, the internment of defeated soldiers, which contributed to the chaos and disintegration of the old world.⁵

TRANSYLVANIA, AS a part of Austria-Hungary until 1918, suffered deeply the consequences of the war. No battles took place in its territory, except for August–October of 1916, when several border regions found themselves on the path of the Romanian army’s offensive. Transylvania was, however, affected by the difficulties of the war: the massive conscription of the men, a drastic drop in the quality of life, a dramatic increase in the prices of food and consumer goods, etc. Between 1 August 1914 and 1 November 1918, 926,500 men aged between 18 and 50 were conscripted in Transylvania, representing 16.5% of the province’s population.⁶ With the departure of so many men, economic activities were left to women, children and the elderly, which led to the disruption of economic life.

The government made numerous requisitions, essential goods became increasingly harder to obtain, bread was of very poor quality, meat was scarce, food and other goods were heavily rationed; even the bells of the churches were requisitioned (melted down in order to make cannons), and a great part of the Romanian elite was conscripted and sent to the front, or was interned in Hungary for easier supervision, especially after Romania’s entry into the war in 1916.

Political pressure was added to economic difficulties: from an ethnic point of view, the population of Transylvania was composed mostly of Romanians, then of Hungarians, Germans, Gypsies etc.; although a minority in Transylva-

nia, the Hungarians held the dominant position in government, politics and the economy, a cause of old and strong resentment and frustration among the Romanians. As to the latter, during the war, their loyalty to the cause of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was regarded with suspicion, a situation aggravated by the fact that the neighboring state, the Kingdom of Romania, was in the enemy camp. During the Romanian campaign in Transylvania, a large part of the population fled, seeking refuge inland; the Hungarians were also afraid of the hostility of the Romanians. At the end of this campaign, after the retreat of the Romanian army, the Hungarian government retaliated against a part of their own citizens of Romanian ethnicity, suspected of collaborating with the enemy.⁷

Most of the articles and books available on this topic cover some aspects pertaining to demographic phenomena such as marriage, birth, and death, in the context of the war. Quantitative data on these events are accompanied by analyses aimed to highlight the impact on the population of men's conscription, war losses, or emigration.⁸ From a social perspective, these works mainly concerned the rural area of Transylvania, with a higher share of the population than the urban areas; some of the issues highlighted in these studies are the manner in which the hardships of war changed the demographic behavior of individuals, their view about the significant moments in life, about family; as in the rest of Europe, there is a significant decrease in the number of marriages during the war, due to the absence of men and the general uncertainty.⁹

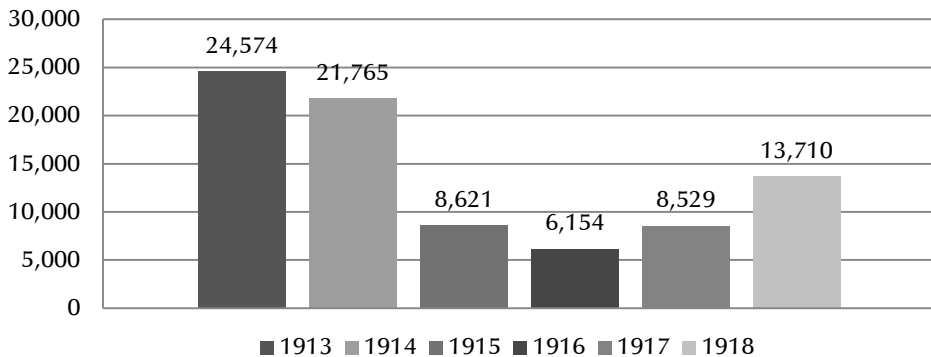
The war profoundly affected the province's population in many other ways than just the disruption of family life. The large number of men gone to the front, the prisoners of war, the Transylvanian volunteers who enlisted in the Romanian army, the population movements due to the advancing armies, the increasing number of widows and orphans, are so many phenomena that had a significant impact.¹⁰

Despite of all these articles and books, Transylvania still lacks a detailed analysis of the main events in family life—birth, marriage, death. This paper aims to analyze the evolution of these events during 1913–1918, based on the statistical data collected by the Hungarian government of the time.¹¹

Marriages

AS SHOWN in Graph 1, the number of marriages decreased considerably during the war, primarily due to the departure of the majority of men aged between 18 and 50, then to the poverty and unpredictability of the war and its consequences. At the beginning of the war, the general opinion was

GRAPH 1. MARRIAGES 1913–1918



that it would end quickly, and the soldiers would be home by Christmas. Gradually, it became clear that no one could predict the end of the war, or its aftermath.

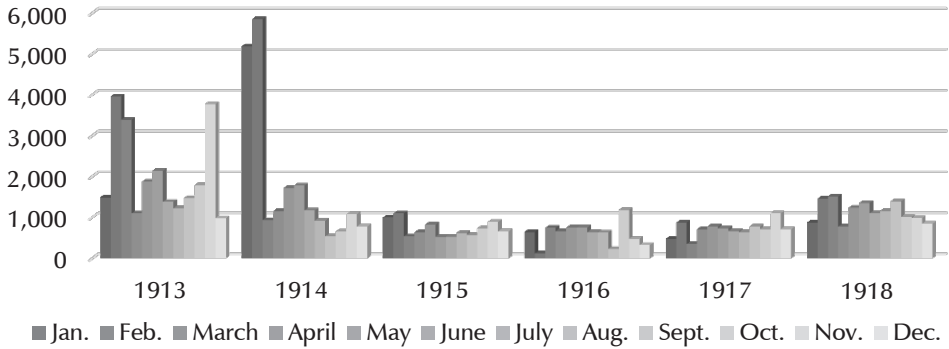
In addition, a shift in the attitude of women towards marriage was gradually appearing.¹² Forced to take up a lot of the men's jobs in households and the economy, a part of the women started to discover their new power, and began to discard old beliefs, no longer considering marriage to be the greatest achievement of their life.

Already in 1914, although the general mobilization was decreed only on 1 August, the number of marriages was 11.34% lower than in the previous year. In 1915, the number of marriages was 64.91% lower than in last year of peace, and in 1916, the year of the Romanian offensive in Transylvania, the number of marriages was 74.95% lower than in 1913. The number of marriages began to rise again in 1917, and especially in 1918, with the end of the war and the return of the men, who rushed to marry and re-enter the normal life cycle.

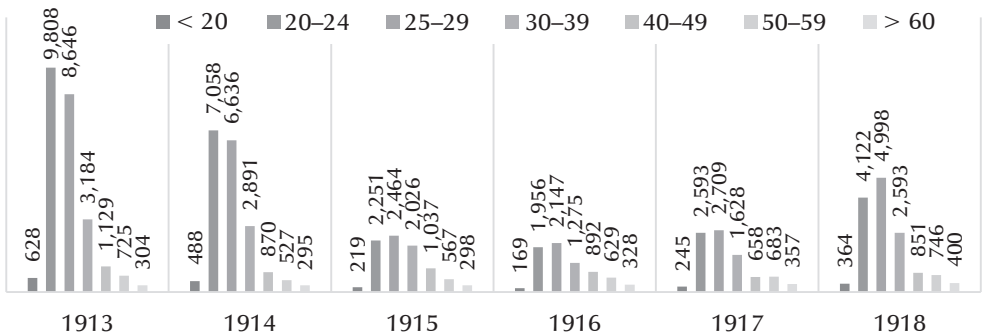
The number of marriages varied on a monthly basis, according to religious fasting periods, when weddings were prohibited (often the months between Christmas and Easter, for example), to the work of the land, or harvests (the autumn was preferred, after winemaking). During the war, the monthly fluctuation was also influenced by the evolution of the conflict, but there is still not enough data available for an exact correlation (see, for example, the month of September 1916, dominated by Romania's offensive in Transylvania)(see Graph 2).

The age of married couples is another aspect with visible changes during the war. If, during the years of peace, most marriages were concluded by men in the 20–24 age group, followed by the 25–29 age group, during the war this ratio reversed slightly, due to the conscription, at the beginning of the war, mostly of the men up to 36 years of age; the men older than that were only mobilized during the spring of 1915 (see Graph 3).

GRAPH 2. MARRIAGES MONTHLY DISTRIBUTION (1913–1918)



GRAPH 3. GROOM AGE



As shown in Table 1, there was an increase in the proportion of marriages with the groom older than 40 (percentage of total marriages per year):

TABLE 1. PROPORTION OF MARRIAGES WITH THE GROOM OLDER THAN 40 (%)

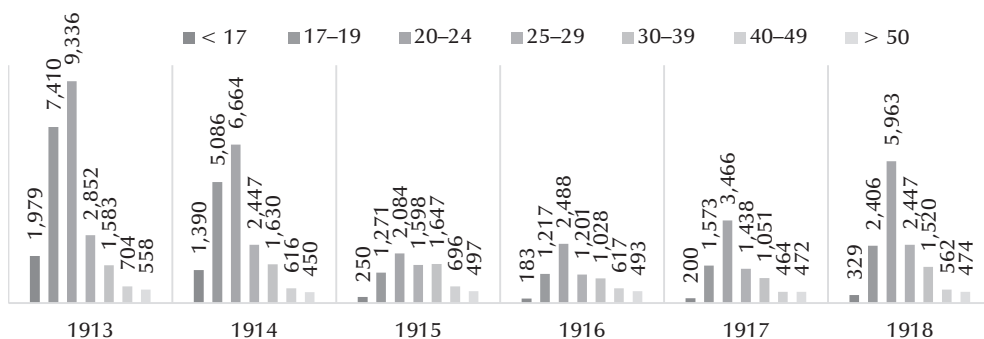
Groom age	1913	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918
40–49	4.62	4.63	11.70	12.06	7.41	6.04
50–59	3.07	2.80	6.39	8.50	7.69	5.30
>60	1.24	1.57	3.36	4.43	4.02	2.84

This situation was caused by the absence of men from the normally preferred age groups (20–39 years); most of the marriages involving men in the second half of their lives are recorded in 1915 and 1916, when the women left at home, unmarried or widowed, settled with grooms from age groups that they would have not

considered otherwise. Towards the end of the war, after the demobilization and the return home of the younger men, these proportions began decreasing again.

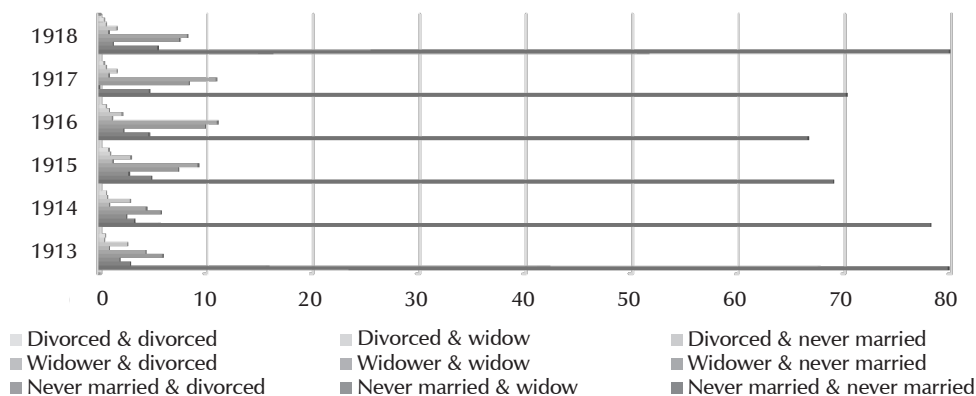
As for the age of the brides, there were no major changes during the war: the largest number of marriages were concluded by women in the 20–24 age group, then by those aged 17–19, as was normally the case in Transylvania at that time (see Graph 4).

GRAPH 4. BRIDE AGE



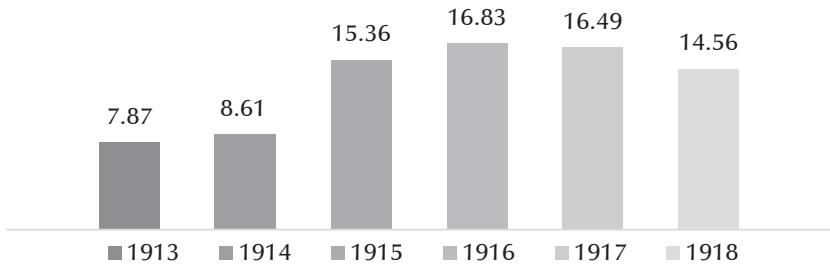
Most of the couples were at their first marriage; during the war, however, the number of marriages involving widowed or divorced partners increased by about 20%: following the death of their husbands on the battlefields, many young women were widowed, becoming available again on the “marriage market.”

GRAPH 5. MARITAL STATUS OF GROOM & BRIDE (PERCENTAGE OF THE TOTAL OF MARRIAGES/YEAR)



During the war, the percentage of marriages concluded by widows was more than double than during the last year of peace, as follows:

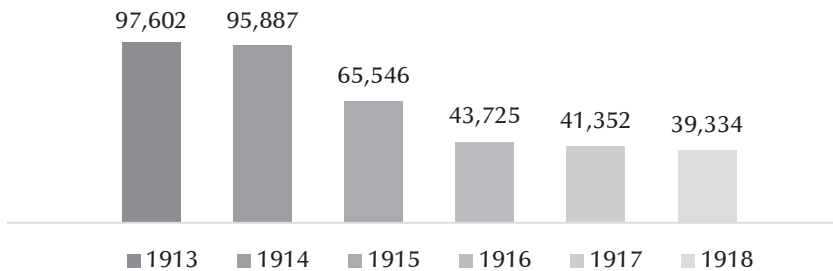
GRAPH 6. MARRIAGES WITH WIDOWED BRIDE (PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL MARRIAGES/YEAR)



Births

THE DRAMATIC decline in fertility, due to the massive departure of men to war and the uncertainty of the times, is considered by some specialists to be responsible for a demographic decrease that equals the loss of life on the battlefield. The population of the states involved in the war took several decades to recover. This drop in numbers also had many social and economic consequences.¹³ During the war and in the following years, in some regions, the number of male births was significantly higher rather than that of female births.¹⁴

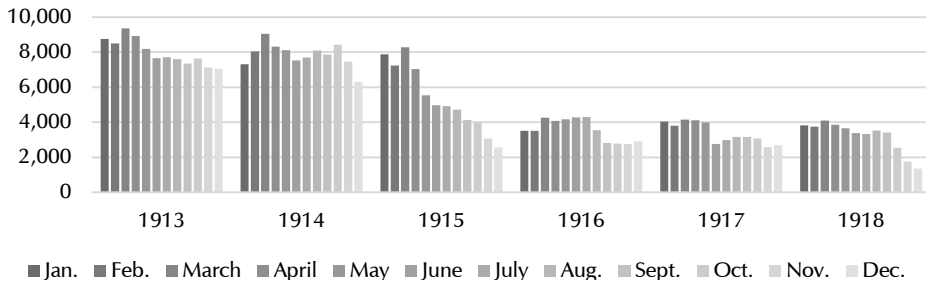
GRAPH 7. BIRTHS 1913–1918



In Transylvania, as in the rest of Europe, the number of births collapsed especially in 1915–1918; beside the most obvious explanation, that of the absence of men able to procreate and provide for the children, some authors¹⁵ also suggest a certain pragmatic attitude towards children: during those extremely difficult times, a newborn baby was not an asset, but a liability, requiring special care and hard to provide for. This would have been an additional reason for limiting births, even in families with men left at home.

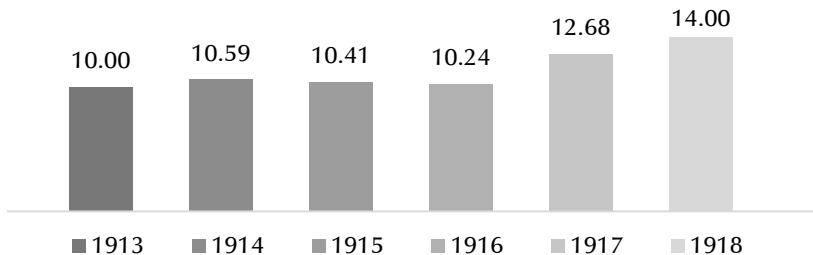
During the first months of the war, the number of births remained somewhat close to that of peacetime, the children born being conceived before the outbreak of the war, or shortly thereafter. The lower figures from the second half of 1915 clearly show the effects of the men’s departure to the battlefield, and of material deprivation.

GRAPH 8. LIVE BIRTHS 1913–1918 MONTHLY DISTRIBUTION



During those years, family life was severely affected. In many households, only women, children and the elderly remained; in many cases, the women took up the task of providing for the remaining family, being forced to act in ways previously reserved to men. The social and moral restraints that normally governed family relationships were no longer as strong as they used to be. In this context, many women renounced conjugal fidelity or chastity, engaging in illicit relationships—a situation frequently mentioned by the sources of that time, and feared by the men on the battlefield. This also resulted, among other things, in the increase of illegitimate births, especially during the last years of the war.

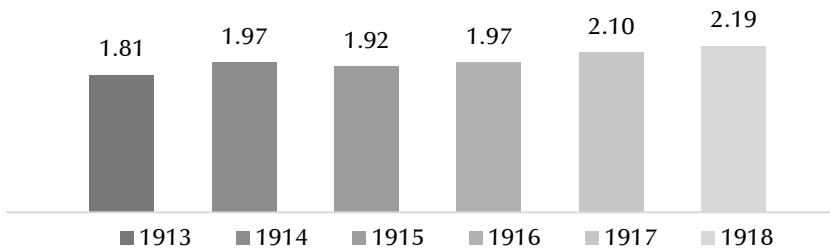
GRAPH 9. ILLEGITIMATE BIRTHS (PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL BIRTHS/YEAR)



An interesting aspect is that of stillbirths. More often than not, pregnant women did not receive specialized care during pregnancy or childbirth, which sometimes resulted in stillbirth. Considering the material deprivations caused by the

war, an increase in the number of stillbirths was expected. Pregnant women lived in worse conditions than in peacetime, they worked harder and ate poorly, and the huge increase in living costs left fewer resources for healthcare. Under these circumstances, the number of stillbirths increased slightly, but not enough to be confidently ascribed to the war. The fact that the number of stillbirths did not increase proportionally to the ravages of the war indicates other possible causes than poverty and material deprivation.

GRAPH 10. STILLBIRTHS AS PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL BIRTHS/YEAR



Deaths

THE DATA available to us covers the deaths recorded on the territory of the province, relating to the population left at home. The deaths on the battlefields are not included in this censuses. This is why the figures seem to show a decrease in mortality during the most difficult years of the war, 1916 and 1917.

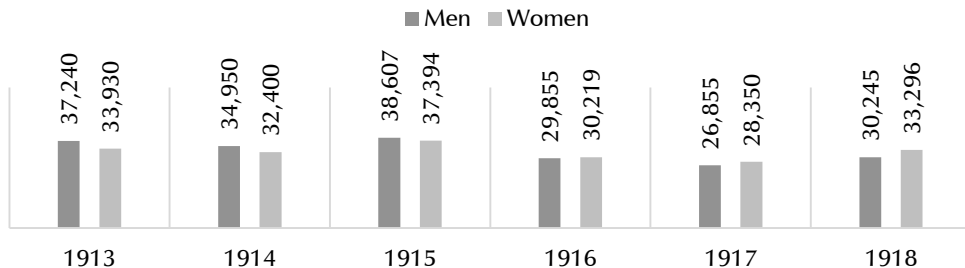
Mortality on the home front was mainly due to disease, primarily infectious, but not only. The main causes were cholera, tuberculosis, dysentery, whooping cough, diphtheria, syphilis, and the Spanish flu. There were also tumors, heart disease, congenital diseases, etc., all reflecting the poor health and living conditions of the population.

Being, as already indicated, incomplete, the data do not allow for definitive conclusions about mortality in Transylvania during the war (see Graph 11).

An interesting aspect is that of infant mortality, with very high rates in Transylvania during the modern era, with an average of 204.5‰ in 1900–1910.¹⁶

Among the medical causes of death for children aged 0–1 in Transylvania in the modern era, we find “congenital debility,” premature birth, birth defects, whooping cough, influenza, pulmonary tuberculosis and even syphilis. The most common were respiratory inflammation and digestive problems. Digestive diseases prevailed during summer, the respiratory ones mostly during winter.¹⁷

GRAPH 11. DEATHS 1913–1918



The lack of medical care contributed to the high number of babies who died at this age. Most mothers were not assisted during pregnancy, neither by a physician, nor by a qualified midwife, but by untrained midwives, or by no one at all. Most sick children did not receive qualified medical care.

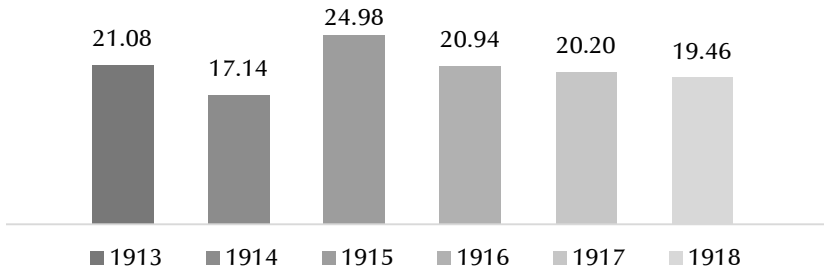
A similar situation could be seen in Western Europe, where a systematic policy to ensure proper medical care in rural areas began only in the second half of the 19th century.¹⁸ In Transylvania this happened later, after World War I.

Poor hygiene also played an important role in these deaths. In most cases, the family homes were unsanitary, poorly ventilated and overcrowded. Most houses were small, with narrow windows through which the light could not enter very well; most of them did not open, so the houses were poorly ventilated. The furniture was scarce, and poor households did not use line. Four or five family members slept in one bed, and those left without a place slept on the floor. In those circumstances, it was impossible to isolate infectious patients, so that epidemics spread easily. Sometimes, children with contagious diseases were intentionally kept together with the healthy ones, in order for the family to “get through” the disease faster.¹⁹

The worsening of these conditions during the war would have normally led to a substantial increase in infant mortality, which did not happen. In 1915, this percentage was higher than the average value for peacetime, but in the following years the rate decreased. One possible explanation would be that this phenomenon had causes far deeper than economic deprivation and social difficulties; maybe, during the modern era, infant mortality was at its worst in Transylvania, regardless of the war.

As for older children, if we consider the number of live births of 1913 as a reference, and follow their situation until 1918, we notice that 21.08% of them died during the first year of life, 4.75% of them died between 1 and 2 years of age, 3.23% between 2 and 3 years, 2.12% between 3 and 4 years, 1.18% between 4 and 5 years, and 1.06% of them died at 5 years of age. In other words, 33.42% of the children born in 1913 died before the age of six. Responsible for this situation is the precarious state of health and hygiene mentioned below.

GRAPH 12. INFANT MORTALITY (PERCENTAGE OF LIVE BIRTHS/YEAR)



Conclusions

THE GREAT War affected the major events in family life—birth, marriage and death—in a way that is obvious in statistical records. The war disrupted the family’s natural rhythms, which ensured both the perpetuation of future generations and the transmission of specific cultural values; it triggered a shift in the attitudes towards marriage, towards the traditional roles of women and men in the household. Some of the statistical data show predictable trends in marriages, births and deaths during the war. Others, however, such as those relating to infant mortality and stillbirths, raise more questions than answers, and may be future research directions.



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Abstract

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Transylvania, as a part of Austria-Hungary until 1918, suffered deeply the consequences of the war. No battles took place on its territory, except for August–October of 1916, when several border regions found themselves on the path of the Romanian army’s offensive. Transylvania was, however, affected by the difficulties of the war: the massive conscription of the men, a drastic drop in the quality of life, a dramatic increase in the prices of food and consumer goods, etc. Family life was severely affected. In many households, only women, children and the elderly remained; in many cases, women took up the task of providing for the remaining family, being forced to act in ways previously reserved to men. The number of marriages decreased considerably during the war, primarily due to the departure of the majority of men aged between 18 and 50, then to the poverty and unpredictability of the war and its consequences. The number of births collapsed especially in 1915–1918.

Keywords

Transylvania, Great War, demography, marriages, births, deaths