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Natural Resources and Society

Gábor Demeter and Beatrix F. Romhányi
Special Editors of the Thematic Issue

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Men under Fire: Motivation, Morale and Masculinity among Czech Soldiers in the Great War, 1914–1918. By Jiří Hutečka. Oxford–New York: Berghahn, 2019. 288 pp.

Jiří Hutečka's new volume contributes to the recent trend in the historiography of investigating the history of World War I from the perspective of the common man. He positions his work into a rather major gap in the historiography. It examines the combat experience of Habsburg soldiers from a gender perspective. Unfortunately, military history studies published in of about East Central Europe has focused for the most part on operational maneuvers and has neglected the war of the "common soldier." Only a handful of pioneering studies have focused on the gender aspects of the conflict, and these studies almost exclusively discussed the role of women in the conflict. In the historiography of the war from the perspective of the Habsburg forces, as Hutečka rightly remarks, "gender identities fall silent when the firing starts."

The main aim of this volume is to fill this gap and challenge the traditional oversimplified explanations of the behavior of Habsburg soldiers. It seeks to overcome the dual framework which interprets their actions in the duality of imperial loyalty and national identity. The volume analyzes, instead, how the Czech soldiers' gender identity influenced their attitudes, behavior, feelings, and morale during the war. To investigate this field, Hutečka uses published and unpublished memoirs, diaries, and letters, many of them have been only available in small, regional collections.

The book is divided into six major chapters. The first, entitled "Tournament of Manliness," discusses the mobilization of Austro-Hungarian soldiers in the Bohemian lands. The book provides a new explanation of the generally positive reaction of Czech recruits to the call of the Habsburg authorities in July 1914. It argues that people enlisted voluntarily in massive numbers because serving in the military was an integral part of the contemporary perception of masculinity. Fulfilling one's military duty could cement or even enhance a man's status in society, while remaining on the sidelines could endanger his position in the male hierarchy. Hutečka argues, for example, that industrial workers who stayed at home were losers in this tournament of manliness, while young student volunteers could achieve "full" adulthood earlier than in peacetime.

The second chapter, "Compromises of Manliness," discusses the experiences of common soldiers after they had entered military service. It argues that new recruits constantly had to reconcile their everyday experiences with their pre-

war perceptions of their masculinity. Due to the nature of military service, these men constantly lost control over their lives, thus losing one of the most important characteristics of their understanding of masculinity. The soldiers' eating habits, lodgings, and everyday routines were all determined by their superiors. Meanwhile, on the home front, women took over many "male" roles, thus endangering the soldiers' positions in society.

The third chapter, entitled "Transformation of Manliness," examined the responses of the soldiers to these challenges. Hutečka argues that comradeship developed among the soldiers. This could also be interpreted as a means of resolving this conflict between hegemonic masculinity and the realities of war.

In the following section, "Degradation of Manliness," the book discusses how the different practices of the Austro-Hungarian army led to the deterioration of the soldiers' morale. It claims that oppressive practices used within the military hierarchy offended the Czech soldiers' notions of their masculinity more than it did their national identity. For example, corporal punishment and the distrust of Czech recruits threatened the masculine identities of these soldiers. This was especially disturbing, because the elite of the Czech lands perceived the Czechs as the most civilized people of the empire, a nation whose members should not be disciplined with barbaric means. Similarly, their warrior self-image was deeply offended by constant accusations of cowardice and treason.

The fifth chapter, "Venue of Masculinity," investigates how soldiers' masculinity was challenged on the home front. It highlights, for example, the ways in which economic problems at home also profoundly affected the masculine identity of the soldiers on the fronts. Men stationed far from their homes were not able to fulfill their primarily male role as providers for their families. They could not oversee their households, and as they were absent, they could not monitor their wives' fidelity. Thus, their fundamental male role as father and husband conflicted with their identities as masculine warriors.

The last chapter discusses the combat experiences of the Czech soldiers on the frontline. It argues that soldiers did not universally embrace the concept of "glorious combat," but many of them perceived their first encounter with the enemy, "the baptism of fire," as a test of manliness. However, after four years of intense fighting, most of them rejected the masculine ideals of the propaganda. The most striking examples of this phenomenon were the large numbers of self-inflicted wounds. At the end of the war, soldiers were willing to hurt their own bodies (which were important symbols of their masculinity) to

escape the hardships of war. Hutečka argues that this act helped them to regain some measure of control over their destinies.

Hutečka concludes that the war which was waged in 1914–1918 was one “immense collective disappointment and shock” for the fighting men. At the beginning of the war, the enlisted soldiers were told that they would attain or retain their hegemonic masculinity status. In reality, the conflict profoundly undermined their position in society. This was true of all the Habsburg soldiers, but certain aspects (accusations of treason, being stationed far from home, etc.) effected the Czech soldiers particularly harshly. Thus, these people were lost by the Habsburg authorities not only as Czechs, but also as men.

Men under Fire is a well-written, thoughtful, and refreshing analysis. It applies a pioneering method and provides interesting and thought-provoking insights into the Habsburg soldiers’ experiences during the war. The findings of the book are convincing and open new fields for further investigation.

There are a few minor points, however, with which one might take issue. First, the book aims to overcome the nationalist approach of the historiography, but it is only partly successful in this effort. While his book convincingly provides alternative explanations of the behavior of soldiers, it still mostly analyses their actions within a national framework. Thus *Men under Fire* does not tell us a universal story about the Habsburg soldiers but rather explains why and how Czech soldiers were different (or not different) from soldiers belonging to other ethnic groups of the empire.

Second, Hutečka had to confront the problems caused by the lack of adequate primary sources. Due to lower levels of literacy, fewer ego-documents (especially diaries and letters) were produced by the Habsburg soldiers than their British or German comrades. Moreover, as Hutečka observes, these documents have never been systematically collected. Consequently, the book, like most studies on the region, often has to rely on post-1918 recollections. Hutečka tries to use these sources carefully, but sometimes he had to base his interpretation on these admittedly unreliable texts.

Despite these minor points, Jiří Hutečka’s recent volume is a very valuable and inspirational contribution to contemporary scholarship. His book is a must-read for historians interested in World War I in East Central Europe and scholars examining gender roles in armed conflicts.

Tamás Révész
Research Centre for Humanities

THE

Hungarian Historical Review

Aims and Scope

The Hungarian Historical Review is a peer-reviewed international journal of the social sciences and humanities with a focus on Hungarian history. The journal's geographical scope—Hungary and East-Central Europe—makes it unique: the Hungarian Historical Review explores historical events in Hungary, but also raises broader questions in a transnational context. The articles and book reviews cover topics regarding Hungarian and East-Central European History. The journal aims to stimulate dialogue on Hungarian and East-Central European History in a transnational context. The journal fills lacuna, as it provides a forum for articles and reviews in English on Hungarian and East-Central European history, making Hungarian historiography accessible to the international reading public and part of the larger international scholarly discourse.

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