Wingfield on Healy, 'Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I'

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*Nation, State, and Family in World War I Vienna*

*Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I* is a tour de force. It is one of the best recent studies of the destruction of the Habsburg Monarchy, as well as an innovative cultural-social history of the Great War. Rather than concentrating on the long-term inability of the multinational empire to conciliate its multiple peoples in an era of nation-states or the weakness of the Habsburg military, Maureen Healy examines the fragmentation of the Viennese home front in her case study of total war. Demonstrating that the imperial capital fell before the Monarchy collapsed in autumn 1918—the decline of Vienna was a process that rendered the city increasingly ungovernable as the war dragged on—Healy provides compelling new support for those who argue that the Monarchy's collapse was due to internal forces.

She draws from, and expands upon, the earlier home front studies of England, France, and Germany. The experience of Healy's Vienna was different than that of Berlin, London, or Paris, both because it was the capital city of a losing power, indeed, a dying state, and because it was a multinational capital competing for cultural and political authority with other cities within the multinational Monarchy. This fascinating study demonstrates that the government's inability to construct a coherent *Staatsidee* had a marked effect on homefront mobilization. By 1918, the Monarchy was discredited not only in the eyes of its national minorities, but also in the eyes of the residents of Vienna, who had long since rejected the notions of self-sacrifice and holding out that had been impressed upon them in 1914.

Following other recent cultural-gender studies of the war, Healy's home front does not comprise solely women and children, but also includes men who were not fighting for a variety of reasons.[1] The reality of wartime Vienna stood in stark contrast to the home front of the 1914 imagination. Rather than bonding together in a community to defend the *Heimat*, the civilians who inhabit Healy's Vienna waged internecine warfare against one another in the on-going search for food, especially during the later years of the war. Women failed to display the solidarity expected of them and delinquent children from fatherless families became commonplace. Healy also describes the dilemma of an often ignored component of the home front: those men who remained behind the lines, many of whom were attacked as "shirking Jews" or "conspiring Czechs," and popularly derided as *Hinterlander* or *Hinderlandsheid*, as opposed to the *Helden der Heimat*, the inscription that appeared on memorials to the war dead throughout German-speaking Central Europe.
Arguing that World War I constituted the most comprehensive mobilization of civilians to date, while marking the beginning of a trend in modern warfare in which the distinction between the civilian and the military realm was lessened, Healy lays out in the introduction the larger themes she addresses through the lens of gender in the volume: home-front sacrifice, the fluidity of the home front and the fighting front, the mobilization of people and resources for the war, and, finally, the wartime changes that permitted the state's entry into areas that had heretofore been considered within the realm of the private, above all the family.

A major theme--civilian participation and the gift of sacrifice in the Great War--is embodied in the Wehrmann im Eisen, put up at the beginning of the war on the Schwarzenbergplatz. For a nominal donation, Viennese residents purchased nails and pounded them into the iron soldier, demonstrating the strength of the Austrian people. As the initial enthusiasm for the war dissipated, the Wehrmann lost his popularity. Healy notes that the golden nails donated to the statue at the war's outbreak were stolen as the figure became less popular, even forgotten, reflecting the breakdown of the collective. (The Wehrmaenner put up in other parts of Cisleithania, symbolic of an unpopular war, were not forgotten and, instead, were among the first statues to fall in the wake of the war's end.)

Divided into two sections, "Politics and Representation," and "State and Family," the book is organized thematically. The first three chapters, which delineate the expansion of politics in Vienna under the pressure of total war, attribute the city's social disintegration to the shortage of food and reliable information. Food and the politics of sacrifice, entertainment and propaganda, together with censorship, rumor, and denunciation, constitute the author's focus. The second half of the book considers the role of the family in the wartime mobilization of civilians. Healy argues that absent formal institutions to rally its civilians for the war effort, the state relied on the family, giving it a predominant role in home-front mobilization.

Healy maps civilian access to food, laying out the tension between city and countryside, fighting and home front, and Austria and Hungary in her fascinating study of the politics of food in chapter 1. She argues that images of internal enemies, who allegedly denied loyal (Roman Catholic, German-speaking) residents of Vienna access to food, were based on previously existing national-religious tropes like the "profiteering Jew" and the "russophile Czech." In the "victim complex," as described by the author, the civilians of Vienna focused on the distribution of food rather than on its availability, and considered themselves exploited on a variety of levels, reaching down to the neighborhood merchants. Moreover, the quest for food raised tensions within families, where its consumption broke down along age and gender lines, as women sacrificed food first to the male head of family and then to their children.

In her discussion of entertainment and propaganda, Healy notes attempts to control perception of the food crisis, if not the crisis itself. She examines the failed Habsburg efforts to paint the external enemy as the victimizer of Austria through the lens of the Monarchy's most successful propaganda effort: the relentlessly optimistic Viennese War Exhibit, which opened in Vienna's beloved Prater in 1916. The exhibitions, which included a prosthetic pavilion and a war graves hall, sought to provide visitors with a particular--positive--vision of the war. Wartime cinema, which the belligerents increasingly employed for home-front propaganda, also sought to control its audience's vision of war.[2] Although wartime cinema served as a kind of war education, giving viewers the opportunity to see the process of war at work, the producers of cinema could not control the reaction of the
viewers, whose comments sometimes made them the target of denunciation.

The third chapter of the book considers censorship, denunciation, and rumor. Healy vividly describes the domestic targets of much governmental censorship and the subjects of the denunciations by the German-speaking, overwhelmingly Roman Catholic Viennese: the Jews, especially refugees recently arrived from Galicia, and the Slavs, particularly the Czechs. The low-level Czech-German violence occurring in the capital for two decades before the war, together with on-going Czech-German conflict in the Bohemian Lands, made the "russophile Czechs" resident in Vienna ideal targets for wartime accusations of lack of loyalty. This conflict included protests orchestrated by the Bund der Deutschen in Niederoesterreich against the planned performance by Czech National Theater at the Theater an der Wien, in connection with Emperor Francis Joseph's sixtieth jubilee in 1908, as well as the Czech community's on-going demands for Czech-language schools, because "education in any other than a Czech school would cripple the Czech child spiritually, morally, and nationally, and it wouldn't learn anything," as one German-language newspaper sarcastically noted.[3]

Although, as the author notes, the number of Czechs living in Vienna was unknown (their number was variously estimated between 100,000 and 500,000 [p. 152]) and there was no way to measure "Czechness," they still were one of the feared domestic "Enemy-Others" of wartime Vienna. Poet-poemicist Josef Svatopluk Machar, Young Czech parliamentary deputy Karel Kramar, and Czech National Socialist parliamentary deputy Vaclac Klofac were among the Czech political figures the imperial government imprisoned on charges of high treason at the outbreak of the war. Their release in mid-1917 overshadowed news of other traitorous Czech behavior that appeared--apparently uncensored--in Cisleithanian newspapers: Czech prisoners-of-war had fought on the side of the Russians in the Battle of Zborov on July 2, 1917, during which the Habsburg line was breached and soldiers of the predominantly Czech 19th Infantry Division were taken prisoner. These so-called Legionnaires--like the beloved Prazske deti, the soldiers of the 28th Infantry Regiment, whose desertion en masse on the Eastern Front in April 1915 formed part of the Viennese vision of the enemy within--would be part of the Czech (-oslovak) interwar pantheon of military heroes.

Employing gender as the central category of analysis in the second half of the book, Healy uses familial terms in her examination of civilian relations to the state: sisterhood, children, fatherless families, and paternalism. Throughout this analysis, the underlying issue is the father's absence from the family, rather than from society, because, as she demonstrates, there were men at home. Healy presents the postwar attempt of some residents to equate the city's social decomposition to its familial decomposition. During the war, ordinary men--and emperors--saw their authority decline, as martial masculinity replaced older definitions of civilian manhood, in which patriarchal authority had played an important role (p. 259). The author shows, much as Elizabeth Heineman has done in her study of women in Nazi and post-war Germany, that in the process of mobilizing the family for the war, the state turned the family inside out and realigned women and children.[4] As a result, the state and the family came into increased contact with one another.

In her examination of sisterhood and citizenship, Healy both contrasts the myth--rooted in notions of women's alleged maternal and care-taking instincts--and the reality of sisterhood. Class, confessional, and national differences served to confound the ideal of unified Austrian sisterhood. The author also analyses the complexities of women's citizenship, determined as it still was by their marital status. One rich example deals with the difficulties faced by Viennese-born women who had been legally
separated from foreign-born husbands. Since Roman Catholics were not permitted to divorce under Austrian law, these women had difficulty documenting to the state that they were no longer emotionally bound to their husbands, and hence their loyalty remained suspect. Consequently, they also had problems obtaining employment to make ends meet. Indeed, some women sought to demonstrate their “Austrianess” through their wartime work for the state, while others stressed their familial relationships with patriotic Austrian males, often on the fighting front.

Discussing women’s increased political activity in the same chapter, Healy notes the Austrian prohibition against women, children, and foreigners joining political organizations. However, she perhaps downplays the degree of female participation in Austrian political life before 1914, which in addition to working for education and employment opportunities, included a range of activities from campaigns for the abolition of prostitution to participation in popular demands for expansion of the franchise. This chapter provides multiple examples of the limitation of sisterhood, not only in terms of class (for example, concerns of the volunteer work of “society” women taking away opportunities for paid employment from working class women), but also in terms of nationality (Gesinnung). The female members of Vienna’s sizeable Czech community are represented in this volume as doubly “other”—both Czechs/Slavs and women—and, as such, they were the subject of suspicion and denunciation.

Women in wartime Vienna, like those in other belligerent states, were offered greatly expanded employment possibilities, for some of which they were not considered to be “naturally” suited. Thus, their movement into these positions had mixed reception. While female nurses in the Austrian Red Cross were publicly celebrated for “feminine virtues of their service” (p. 204), those women who participated in the Women’s Auxiliary Labor Force during the second half of the war met with much criticism, including accusations of being adventure seekers, or even serving as prostitutes for the officers.[5]

Healy makes an important contribution to the growing body of literature on the history of childhood with her discussion of children's experience in wartime Vienna. She describes idealized children—robust and healthy—as holding great symbolic promise, as coming to represent the regenerative power of war. But, she notes, children’s contributions to the war effort went from making sacrifices to “being sacrificed” in ways that affected both their health and education due to wartime expediency. Children’s labor—inside and outside the classroom—became a necessary part of the total war economy. Thus, by the end of the war, Austria’s future, as reflected in its youth, was not promising (p. 257).

Decreasing enthusiasm for the war—among the citizens and the military—as well as a decrease in the esteem in which the military was held are among the multiple issues the author addresses in the fifth chapter. Among her conclusions is the fact that fatherly authority ceased to be a defining trait of manhood for ordinary men, because the attributes of maleness were to be found on the fighting front, while, at the same time, the lack of fathers on the home front was responsible for the deterioration of society. Moreover, imperial paternalism collapsed under the weight of its subjects' material needs. Re-establishing old roles for men while defining new ones would become one of the cultural projects of the interwar era. The author asserts that rhetoric during the late 1920s of an ongoing "crisis of fatherhood" suggests that prewar models of paternal authority in family and society were not easily resurrected (p. 299). Healy concludes that one of the paradoxes of total war is the lack of
"opportunity for civilians to change uniforms and return to 'normal life,' because they were presumed to have been living normal life all along" (p. 313).

*Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire* will, of course, be of interest to historians of the Habsburg Monarchy, modern Europe, and First World War, as well as to cultural, family, gender, and urban historians, more generally. With its innovative approach to total war and the downfall of the Monarchy, this eminently readable volume should find an audience far beyond academia. I fervently hope that Cambridge University Press will publish this book in paperback by autumn, so I can assign it in my Habsburg history class.

Notes


[2]. For example, interwar Germany's largest film producer, the Berlin-based *Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft* (Ufa) had been founded by the German General Staff in 1917 on Erich Ludendorff's initiative.


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