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Conclusion

Sandra Brée, Saskia Hin

The idea behind this book was to bring together quantitative and qualitative contributions from a range of European countries to shed light on the Impact of the First World War on marriages, divorces and gender relations in several European countries that were affected differently by the war. Chapter contributions asked how key parts of the life course of ordinary citizens were affected by the war that ravaged Europe from 1914 up to – in most but not all countries - 1918, and, what the role of change or lack of enduring change in gender relations was in shaping these patterns.

The choice for this thematic was given in by the fact that, thus far, demographic perspectives have been as good as absent in the historical debate about the impact of WWI on gender relations. While empirical information about general demographic patterns of marriage and divorce has been readily available for some countries involved in the war (cf. Henry, 1966; Festy, 1984; Winter, 1992; Eggerickx, 2014), even the most basic trends were surprisingly understudied for many others (cf. Kok and Van Bavel 2010).

A main contribution of this volume, hence, lies in the fact that it reveals how patterns of marriage and divorce evolved during and after the war in several countries and regions about which we hardly knew anything before. Thanks to newly available primary sources that several contributors have painfully collected themselves, we now have an understanding of what happened to marriage patterns in current-day Albania, the Urals, and Poland in the context of the first great war.

Naturally, contributions on these underexplored territories do not provide definitive answers, but rather open up new perspectives. They also raise plenty of new questions. Other chapters focus on countries for which basic patterns of marriage and divorce during the war were already

known and dig in deeper from this starting point. Together, the contributions reveal how heterogeneous the demographic experiences of war and the impact of warfare on gender relations were – not only at the country level but also, and especially so, at the level of subgroups within societies. People's sex and marital status mattered to their demographic war experience (Sierakowska ; Hanna ; Brée), but so did their geographic residence (cf. e.g. Gruber *et al.*), whether they were married to or involved with a local or a foreigner (cf. Lorke), lived in a town or region where battalions were stationed (Debruyne) or POWs were sent (Glavatskaya *et al.*) or not, and what their socio-economic background or status was (Verfaillie) – a status that, moreover, could be lost or turned up-side-down as a result of the extreme economic conditions during the war (Hin *et al.*). Similarly, short-term changes in local economic conditions during the war could raise or lower people's chances at getting married (Ogórek).

The emphasis that this volume places on the importance of looking at the evolution of gender relations in the context of the First World War from a demographic perspective is novel, and this volume should be regarded as a sampling indicating how such research could be carried out. We believe that the heterogeneity of experiences in the triad of war, marital status, and gender relations that this volume highlights provides valuable nuance, stratification, and complexity to a debate that has tended to focus on the simple dichotomous question of whether or not the war spurred gender equality in Europe, or at best has made a distinction between different social groups. We hope that future research will be inspired to deepen the exploratory work done here, by using mixed-method approaches drawing on both qualitative and quantitative material to get a more detailed understanding of the variety of experiences lived by subgroups of populations across Europe. The concept of “intersectionality” as used by researchers in gender studies and applied by Verfaillie to the area of historical demography provides a good framework for approaching the complex interactions of social, economic, and demographic characteristics that shaped people's life histories around WWI. It is only then that

we can get a sense of the full spectrum of experiences, and begin to unveil how different forces interacted to shape heterogeneous pathways in the development of gender relations.

The future will provide ever more opportunities for a more detailed understanding of the relationships between warfare, marriage, divorce, and gender relations. When it comes to demographic data, time tends to be the friend more than the enemy of the researcher. Many individual-level data on the war years themselves have only just become accessible as 100-year protection laws on personal data in records of public administrations have elapsed. It takes manpower and time to digitize and prepare samples of these data that are large enough for analyses of cross-sectional subgroups. Moreover, to assess the longer-term impact of the war years, we need samples to include the 1920s at least. All this implies that it is, paradoxically enough, still early. What we need to do now, between historians, demographers and gender experts, is to discuss, clarify and sharpen research questions that should be asked and actions that need to be taken to prepare and facilitate for a clear agenda to be carried out.

As editors of this volume, we see several elements brought up by the current contributions that deserve a place on this agenda, and deserve further attention in subsequent debate.

Heterogeneity in adaptive marriage behaviour

First, several contributions highlight how it was *adaptations* in marriage behaviour made that over the longer run, the war only had a limited impact on marriage rates. While during the war itself, marriage rates plummeted, in most countries there was a quick catch-up during its aftermaths. Seen from a purely demographic perspective, the war thus had only very limited effects on the propensity to marry¹. For some, this conclusion might equate to long-term insignificance. However, from the broader perspective of the interlinkage between war, marriage patterns and gender relations, the fact that this seemingly weak impact resulted from

compensatory behaviour raises many questions and makes the phenomenon all the more interesting. Who were these men and women that adapted to changes in the supply side of the marriage market to find a partner? Chapters in this volume show that new kinds of couples appeared. In response to the strong mortality of young men, women chose to marry younger or older men, from more distant parts of their countries² or even from other countries.³ The latter included relations between young men coming to rebuild devastated countries and young single or widowed people, and even relations between occupiers and occupied⁴. War prisoners also sometimes married were they used to be held prisoner⁵. While the contours of the nature of adaptive behaviour thus become visible, many questions remain, and new ones arise. Which kind of women, for example, were more likely to settle for “second choice” men? Including the socio-economic characteristics of women in mixed method approaches, using the concept of intersectionality, as done in the chapter by Florent Verfaillie, may in future prove a useful method to reveal new insights regarding such adaptive behaviour.

For lack of currently available longitudinal material to follow up on precisely these marriages, we do not know how stable or unstable these new types of marriages were compared to other marriages – for now we can only guess that they might have been less durable or faced more challenges than “conventional” marriages due to the extra challenges they faced. At the same time, we know that there are tipping points where previously exceptional phenomena become common enough to start to impact social norms, and lead to greater acceptance.⁶ The exceptional conditions that led to the formation of these couples may have helped to effectuate this.

Separations and divorces

As Martha Hannah shows in her chapter, everyday-life separation is very hard for couples to live with. Many couples wrote to each other every day, trying to keep the absent man into the home. For some of them, this daily correspondence probably helped a lot the reunion after months or even years of separation. But, despite all the letters and even visits – at home during permissions or even at the front for the few women who managed to go – some couples some couples have had difficulty with the husband's return home. In France, as in Britain¹, the number of divorces rises dramatically just after the war, but this increase mainly compensates for divorces that did not take place during the war. However, Sandra Brée shows that, in France, the war brides had the higher risks of divorce but also that the couples married just before the war and just after it had also higher risks of divorce than the cohorts that were not affected by the war. The conflict had a strong impact on couples and family that were already formed, by separating them for long periods of time, bringing home husbands and fathers psychologically and physically traumatised in homes where women had learned to live without them and where children had sometimes never seen them. But it also impacted the youngest cohorts. In addition to having been the most affected in terms of mortality, the youngest soldiers were the most likely to be the most psychologically affected by the conflict because of their young age. Even if most of them were not married or fathers at the time of the conflict, they probably had girlfriends or even fiancées from whom separation was probably as hard. Finally, for those who managed to survive, the war took them their best years and traumatised them for ever having strong repercussions on their romantic, marital, and family lives.

War experiences did, however, bring into public discourse some of the realities of break-up, including the unmarried cohabitation which might follow separation (Thane).

¹ Brée and Thane in this volume. Ogórek also shows that the number of divorcees in the persons who (re)marry are on the rise after the war.

Gender relations and the place of women

Many wartime changes were temporary, including the increase in formal divorce and separation just after the war or the increased employment opportunities during the war especially for working-class women² but some have persisted. During the interwar period, changes can be observed in the gender relations and in the place of women but it hard to know the precise role of the war. Indeed, in a lot of countries, women the right to vote³ but not everywhere⁴. But, as Thane mentioned it, it cannot always be attributed to the war as in Britain where the pre-war demands were very strong. The war may, however, have influenced the timing.

While women gain the right to vote in several countries, in other places in Europe they were relegated back to their role as mothers and wives⁷; even in the countries where they had replaced men in factories or farms – or maybe because they had. In various countries, such as Belgium, France, and Poland,⁸ political parties as well as the Catholic Church emphasized the need for both women and men to revert back to their traditional gender roles in order to successfully rebuild the country. Economic devastation or not, we may therefore simply see this reversal as a process of recovery characterized by a falling back to pre-war norms and traditions. During the interwar period, in many countries, laws were introduced to make propaganda for and the selling and use of contraceptives illegal. For instance, in France, a 1920 law criminalised abortion and prohibited the promotion of birth control, and a 1923 law toughened penalties for abortion. In Belgium, a 1920 law amended the Criminal Code to punish abortion practices as well as the promotion of contraception and abortion. Furthermore, in France (1929), Belgium (1930) and Germany (1933), family allowances were created. In Sweden, the Royal Commission on Population was established in 1935, in particular to document the decline in

² Thane, *infra*; Reynolds 1996; Thébaud 2014.

³ Britain, Hungary, Romania, Georgia, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and Greece (for local elections), Sweden, Denmark, Albania, Spain (except for married women and prostitutes).

⁴ France, Italy, Switzerland, married women in Spain, even where they worked and “lead the country” during the war as in France.

the birth rate and to make recommendations to the political authorities on how to revert this unwanted trend (Pauti, 1992). However, despite the implementation of state policies – in the form of both restrictions and incentives – designed to encourage fertility and rebuild the population in response to the heavy losses incurred during the First World War and the deficit of births during the war, women who had their child(ren) between 1920 and 1940 were among the least fertile of the 20th century⁵. In the Soviet zone, the authorities pursued completely different objectives: to spread a new family and male model - the socialist ideal of equal human and women's rights in everyday life. By promoting birth control through contraception, these services helped to preserve women's economic productivity and again demonstrate the link between population policy and the interests of states⁶.

At the same time, in parallel with the high-level legal trends that contained the position of women in various European countries, authors also observe a growing acceptance of what previously had been deviant family models. While the vulnerability and hardship experienced by single women and single mothers were not in themselves new, the First World War brought their situation under attention. It became clear that dominant norms for women as married mothers were overtaken by the reality of war. This gave rise to voices that tried to defend single women and single mothers, two groups that did not comply with dominant norm, in public debate. In Poland, single women were increasingly accepted, as Sierakowska observes.⁷ Pat Thane notes that in England, support for single mothers and their children grew further between the wars, and while it first came from charities, it was increasingly expressed also at the local and central government level.⁸ The fact that these women were seen as unwillingly pushed into

⁵ Brée et al., 2017

⁶ Theofilakis, 2008.

⁷ Sierakowska, in this volume.

⁸ Thane, in this volume.

“deviant” behaviour helped invoke sympathy for their situation. The suggestion of a relationship between exceptional war conditions and lasting normative change thus again presents itself.

The deeper question that presses itself is how we can understand and explain how the tolerance for “deviant behaviour” among women turned into a lasting acceptance of certain of these behaviours, and rejection of others. The cases of Russia, France and Belgium on the one side, and that of England on the other, illustrate how alignment of individual and collective interest might have played a pivotal role in these processes and their outcomes – one that deserves further attention. It also raises the question whether and to what extent developments at the *public* or legal level operated, or were intended to operate, as mechanisms to counter and undermine a trend that was, perhaps, forceful in *private*, non-political spheres. All these questions, we hope, are food for thought for future research.

Marriage as an institution for coping

One of the most intriguing findings that came to the fore in this volume, as well as in earlier research, is that on the long run, the First World War had surprisingly little impact on the share of married women and men. Marriage rates simply spiked up steeply after the end of the war, and the share of permanently unmarried women was much lower than the dramatic war losses would lead one to expect. The share of divorces did rise, but not dramatically so. While both might be seen as indications of a ‘lack of impact’ from a demographic point of view, such a stance ignores that in fact, the ‘lack of impact’, especially on marriage patterns, was in fact caused by human action: by men and women marrying differently than they had done before – to partners of different ages, of different geographic backgrounds, of different professions and social standings. When judged by intensity of adaptive behavioural strategies, the First World

War thus had a profound impact, one that was important for everyday family life and couples' relationships.

Maybe, therefore, we should not ask what impact the war had on marriage, but what impact marriage had in the war. Perhaps the instability and high stress that the war provoked, and need for individuals to adjust to living conditions that were so different from what they had been before (including in terms of the public and private gender roles of both women and men), turned marriage into an institution and form of social organization that was a vital for most people to make it through. From this perspective, even if the war for some caused disruption of their marriage, for others, perhaps most, being in a couple or in a marriage was one of the most important coping institutions and sources of stability in troubled times. The qualitative evidence used by a number of the contributions, such as that of Marta Hanna on France and Katarzyna Sierakowska on Poland, shows the importance of – sometimes profoundly changed – marriages as perceived by couples themselves. The notion of marriage as the ultimate coping mechanism would explain the stability of marriage behaviours we see in the quantitative data, as well as the dominance of societal forces aiming to restore pre-war norms and pre-war society for the sake of stability. But, as noted above, not all returned “back to normal” after the war, and even if, in many countries, conservative forces dominated at least at the public stage, the emancipation of women and the modification of gender relations continued.

Integrative approaches to complex questions

Alongside substantive questions, this volume also points the reader to the need for methodologically innovative approaches that can help unveil the complex story of warfare, marriage, divorce, and gender relations. Contributions to this volume show that joining both quantitative and qualitative perspectives work best to get to new insights, but doing so asks a

lot from a single researcher. We need to think about ways to facilitate methodologically complementary approaches to specific research topics, areas, or questions that fully integrate available resources. This will not be an easy task, but we hope this volume provides encouragement by showing the benefits brought by such approaches. To some extent, it is in fact beneficial both that the interest in writing war history from a bottom-up perspective is in fact relatively new, and that many resources for doing historical demographic research on the war period are only becoming accessible and available now. Research on the interrelationship between warfare, gender relations and demography is only just emerging, and far from an established field with routines and structures clad in iron. This offers opportunities for the taking.

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¹ Thane, *infra*; Ogorek, *infra*; Henry 1966.

² Ogorek, *infra* ;

³ Henry 1966

⁴ Lorke, *infra* ; Debruyne, *infra*.

⁵ Glavatskaya et al., *infra*.

⁶ On norms as a sociological concept, see Stanford Encyclopedia 2018. For normalization process theory, see May *et al.* 2009.

⁷ Sierakowska, in this volume; Rebreyend, 2008

⁸ Hin et al., *infra* ; Sierakowska, *infra*