Chapter 14

Losing Manliness: Bohemian Workers and the Experience of the Home Front

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The topic of gender wartime experience of men living in the Habsburg monarchy between the years 1914–1918 constitutes a field which is as yet almost totally unexplored in historiography. Inspiration may be drawn from research on western European societies or Germany; however, this topic is more or less overlooked in the historiography of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Relevant scholarship has been primarily focused on the female experience and has consequently centered on the questions of the reformulation of the main codes of femininity in connection with the broad restructuring of the war era economy, with the ever-present and constantly increasing material shortage or in the absence of the drafted male population.

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Maureen Healy’s groundbreaking work on wartime Vienna was the first to differentiate thoroughly between the gender contingent experiences of women, children and men. Healy used the example of the Habsburg capital to show how the rising material crisis in the Austrian lands played a part in the internal differentiation and radicalization of the urban society and how it contributed to the gradual delegitimization of the current order, which resulted in the total collapse and break-up of the whole state in the autumn of 1918. Thus the focus of her work, the society of the wartime Habsburg capital, can serve as a welcome impetus for further research on Austria as a whole.

This is also the main aim of this chapter, which will continue in the direction taken by Maureen Healy, and simultaneously shift its scope geographically and thematically. It will focus on the environment of the Czech lands, which became, next to Vienna, another main epicentre of social and ethnic tensions during 1914–1918 and where the current order was also heavily delegitimized in the autumn of 1918. Subsequently the study will not focus on one particular urban society, as Maureen Healy did for wartime Vienna, but will direct its attention to the milieu of Bohemian workers.


5 ‘Bohemian’ indicates workers of both languages used in Bohemia at that time, i.e. German as well as Czech. Although the wartime experience may have varied according to ethnicity in many respects, there is no reason to presume that the crisis of masculinity, which stays at the centre over the following pages, paid much attention to the language the workers were speaking. The only exception is the very last part, which focuses on politics, and which centres exclusively on the Czech-speaking workers’ milieu.