

Introduction to Volume III

JAY WINTER

The third volume of the Cambridge History of the First World War explores the role of civil society in the conflict. By ‘civil society’ we mean those institutions and practices outside the state through which the war effort was waged. We include the market and the family as fundamental elements within civil society, and emphasise the role of family and gender in the waging of war.

The damage the war inflicted on civil society was staggering. There were not only the toll of casualties and the complex efforts of medical authorities to save lives, limit suffering and serve the state, but other forms of damage as well – internment, incarceration, either as prisoners of war or as enemy aliens, the targeting of minorities and what Peter Gatrell terms ‘refugeedom’. All took their toll in war. And it was within families and on anonymous streets, with shades drawn down, that the crippled in mind and body were cared for during and after the war. In most respects, the state was not the source of recovery, when recovery was possible; individuals, families and associations of all kinds did that job, just as those family members of war-wounded men and women still do it today.

An essential part of this story is cultural. How contemporaries understood the violent world in which they lived framed what they did. Their understanding was mediated by many art forms – painting, sculpture, music, poetry, prose, film – and by many practices of faith, commemoration and mourning which continued long after the Armistice. All are traced in this volume.

We saw in Volumes I and II that the killing did not end in 1918; neither did the pain the disabled suffered or the widows and orphans had to live with. It is important to recognise the hidden injuries of war in all post-war societies, and to appreciate to what extent the shadow of war has extended for generations after the Armistice. While we attempt an accounting of the costs of the war, human, material, political and cultural, we recognise that no one can fully establish the true losses of war – the truncated lives and hopes, the lost

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potential, the lives not lived and contributions to well-being foregone. Here too we encounter a global story, transcending national boundaries.

Perhaps one of the true mysteries of the war was the resilience of millions of men and women during and after a conflict of unprecedented violence and savagery; the stubborn survival of irrational kindness and of generosity of spirit amidst the bitterness of the First World War. Here too, the history of civil society is essential in helping to bring us into the heart of war, with all its contradictions and enduring legacies.

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PART I

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PRIVATE LIFE

Introduction to Part I

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This section of the book considers the multiple ways in which families adjusted to the challenges of war. The mobilisation of 70 million men separated married couples in an unprecedented way all over the world. How marriages survived, and how children and the elderly coped with the fragmentation of family life, are critical questions here, and ones which are now central to our understanding of the lingering effects of the Great War.

Focusing on family history shows the transnational character of the war in numerous ways. The pressures of mobilisation, of sustaining a family and a family farm or business, of looking after the wounded and the ill, transcended national boundaries. So did the epistolary outpourings among both soldiers and their loved ones. The significance of the letters shared between fathers and children may even have established a new medium for the expression of love within family life. Gendered distinctions as to the right degree of repression of sentiment survived the war, but they were also changed during it and by it. The history of emotion is embedded in these stories. They are essential to the history of war, and given the vast dispersal of soldiers during the conflict, that history straddled the globe.

These chapters show the development of the cultural history of war over the last twenty years, and present material of vital importance to students of the national history of each combatant country. More is to be learned about the adaptations of families in different theatres of military operations, particularly in the Ottoman Empire, and on the Eastern Front, but the framework of analysis provided here is ripe for exploitation in future work in this field.

I

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In August 1914 Maurice Masson had no choice but to abandon his academic post in Switzerland, return to France, and report for duty. As he made his way to the front he observed his compatriots, some young and enthusiastic, but many more sombre and heartsick. It seemed, he thought, as if ‘the better part of their hearts remain at home’.¹ Masson was an exceptional man in many regards, not least his ability to complete a two-volume dissertation in the trenches. But in one important respect he resembled the unsophisticated rural soldiers who went to war while their hearts remained at home. He too was married. Conscription in France and across Europe guaranteed that married men would be a significant presence in all continental armies. In France, upwards of 50 per cent of all men in uniform were married, as were at least one-third (and quite probably more) of all German and Italian soldiers: in Bavaria, where German archival records are the most complete, married men accounted for more than half of all conscripts. At least 40 per cent of all men who served in the army of the Habsburg Empire were married. The military service of married men in Austria was so commonplace that ‘of the 25,616 Viennese men who had died in service between 1914 and 1918, about 70 per cent were married’.² Even in Russia, where conscription reforms enacted in 1912 had

1 Pierre Maurice Masson, *Lettres de guerre, août 1914 – avril 1916*, preface by Victor Giraud (Paris: Hachette, 1917), p. 1. Letter to his wife, dated 4 August 1914.

2 Colin Dyer, *Population and Society in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1978), pp. 43–4. In France, 1.4 million soldiers died as a result of injuries sustained in the war; 630,000 women received widows’ pensions. This suggests that at least 45 per cent of all French soldiers were married. Given that the mortality rate was highest among the youngest military classes, an extrapolation based on mortality rates alone probably underestimates the number of married soldiers in the French army. For Germany, see Benjamin Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914–1923*, trans. Alex Skinner (Oxford: Berg, 2007), p. 36; for Italy, Francesca Lagorio, ‘Italian widows of the First World War’, in Frans Coetzee and Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee (eds.), *Authority, Identity and the Social History of the Great War* (Oxford: Bergahn Books, 1995), p. 195, n. 16. On Austria, see Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in*

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exempted from military service 'the only son or sole able-bodied male worker of a household', married men still served in significant numbers: by 1916, 44 per cent of all peasant households in Moscow province had seen all their male workers – including, presumably, many married men – drafted into military service.³ Indeed, there were so many married men in the Russian army that their wives, dubbed *soldatki*, acquired a moral authority and political force of revolutionary consequence.⁴

In Britain and its Dominions there was no conscription to compel men, married or single, to serve from the very beginning of the war, and the proportion of married men in the armed forces dropped accordingly. Although the state did not actively discourage married men from volunteering, the moral imperative to serve – so pressing and unambiguous for single men – was much more muted. A married man, it was well understood, had obligations to his family as legitimate and immediate as those to King and Country. Nonetheless, married men were by no means absent from the rolls of the British, Canadian, or (to a lesser degree) Australian forces. In Britain, where military service became compulsory only in 1916, married men were evident in the ranks from 1914 onwards – when more than half a million wives were in receipt of state-paid separation allowances – and in ever more substantial numbers as the war progressed: more than a million by July 1916 and in excess of 1.5 million by 1918.⁵ Married men in the far-flung settler colonies of the British Empire also bade farewell to their wives, parents and families and travelled great distances to defend the Empire. A sense of loyalty to the mother country, an economic downturn in 1913–14 that left many men in Canada looking for steady employment, and a desire to prove deserving of their wives' esteem: all motivated married men in the Empire to enlist. In Canada, where conscription went into effect only in 1917 and ultimately sent few conscripts overseas, almost one-fourth of all men who served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force were married. By contrast, married men represented only 16 per cent of the men serving in

World War I (Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 259 and 219, n. 24. Healy notes that the Dual Monarchy suffered 1,016,200 military deaths and cites estimates to the effect that probably 400,000 Austrian women were widowed during the war.

3 Aaron B. Retish, *Russia's Peasants in Revolution and Civil War: Citizenship, Identity and the Creation of the Soviet State, 1914–1922* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 27, 46, n. 95.

4 Barbara Alpern Engel, 'Not by bread alone: subsistence riots in Russia during World War I', *Journal of Modern History*, 69 (December 1997), pp. 696–721; Mark Baker, 'Rampaging *soldatki*, cowering police, bazaar riots and moral economy: the social impact of the Great War in Kharkiv Province', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 35 (2001), pp. 137–55.

5 Susan Pedersen, 'Gender, welfare and citizenship in Britain during the Great War', *American Historical Review*, 95:4 (1990), p. 985.

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the Australian Imperial Force, which remained for the duration of the war untouched by conscription and was predominantly an army of young men.⁶

It is clear, therefore, that the Great War was fought not only by the callow lads newly out of school whose post-war memoirs of alienation and anger towards civilian society have so powerfully influenced popular memory. Yet the married soldier of the Great War has all but disappeared from historical memory. His experiences, the connections he retained with home, and the unique anxieties he and his wife had to contend with as a married couple separated by combat remain under-examined facets of the war. By turning our attention to the experience of married couples in wartime, we can explore how husbands and wives worked to bridge the physical and existential gap that separated combatants from civilians; how the war prompted temporary (and sometimes permanent) changes in the character of married life; and how couples confronted, overcame and sometimes fell victim to the stresses associated with long-distance marriage and the anxieties of war.

To speak of 'the couple' is, of course, to oversimplify: every married soldier went to war with a kitbag of affections (and afflictions) unique to himself. Recently married couples, like Paul and Marie Pireaud, were in the first throes of infatuation.⁷ Other couples had been married for several years when war broke out. Masson had married in 1906 and he and his wife, the daughter of a prominent French scientist, remained united by their religious faith, their deep love, and an unwavering commitment to the life of the mind. Although many other marriages of long-standing had been tested by economic uncertainty and everyday disagreements, they too remained grounded in affection and empathy. Frank Maheux, who scraped together a living as a lumberjack in the backwoods of Quebec, enlisted in 1914 (without telling his wife), not to escape an unhappy family life but to provide a more regular income for his wife and five children. During eight years of married life George and Margaret Ormsby had also seen their share of economic insecurity and more than the occasional clash of two strong wills, but their marriage had been cemented by the births of two much-loved children. Herbert Oates, a skilled labourer from Leeds whose oldest child had been born ten years before the war, was

6 Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House, 1993), p. 279; L. L. Robson, 'The origin and character of the first AIF, 1914–1918: some statistical evidence', *Historical Studies*, 15:61 (1973), p. 739.

7 The wartime correspondence of Paul and Marie Pireaud is now deposited in French military archives at Vincennes, Service historique de la Défense, 1Kt T458, 'Correspondance entre le soldat Paul Pireaud et son épouse 10 jan. 1910–1927'. I have examined the Pireaud marriage in *Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

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not eager to enlist nor enamoured of military life when conscripted in 1916, but his misspelled letters reveal a great affection for his wife and four children. The more literate letters of Wilfrid Cove, a devoted family man who worked as a bank clerk in London, reveal a similarly happy home life.

These and many other couples whose wartime correspondence has survived were sustained by mutual affection; others, no doubt, welcomed wartime separation as a respite from a marriage marred by misery, mutual recrimination and physical abuse. It is not clear why the Viennese woman who murdered her husband, a military reservist, in 1915 did so, but the deed itself suggests something less than a happy marriage.⁸

If not all couples were happily married, some were not married at all. Few were of the distinguished social status of André Kahn, a French lawyer who scandalised his family by living with a divorcée, for common-law unions were more frequent in the urban working classes than in the ranks of the bourgeoisie. Nonetheless, the war brought to light many 'irregular' unions because military service forced the state to acknowledge, in ways that it had previously ignored, the legitimate needs and interests of common-law couples. It became customary for the state to provide separation allowances to the wives and families of men who enlisted, regardless of the legal status of their union. This was true in France, Germany and Italy, where conscription compelled men to leave their families to fend for themselves; and in Britain and Canada, where men were reluctant to volunteer if their families would be left in penury. In France, the state encouraged couples who had lived together before the war in a *union libre* to regularise their situation, if need be through a 'marriage by proxy': as Clémentine Vidal-Naquet has shown, a law introduced in 1915 that allowed couples to marry while the fiancé served at the front made it possible for engaged couples, whose weddings had been postponed by the outbreak of war, and common-law couples to marry and thus secure the pension benefits that would accrue to widows and orphans in the event of the soldier's death.⁹ In Germany, unmarried mothers of children whose father died in the war could petition the state to be officially recognised as 'Frau' rather than 'Fräulein', thus freeing themselves and their children of the stigma of illegitimacy. Catherine Dollard has demonstrated that petitions of this sort were more likely to find a sympathetic reception during the war than in previous years, when the state had been reluctant to 'reward' women for their irregular

8 Maureen Healy, 'Becoming Austrian: women, the state, and citizenship in World War I', *Central European History*, 35:1 (2002), p. 27.

9 Clémentine Vidal-Naquet, 'S'épouser à distance: le mariage à l'épreuve de la Grande Guerre', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 35:3 (2006), pp. 148–9.

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unions.¹⁰ Nonetheless, official recognition of common-law unions was by no means uncontroversial: in 1917, the virtuous matrons of the Montreal Patriotic Fund objected to the disbursement of separation allowances to the unmarried 'wives' of soldiers serving in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. They feared that such provisions 'cast a slur on the high estate of matrimony and on all legal wives, which slur is not to be borne without protest'.¹¹

Wives, legal and otherwise, looked on with trepidation as their menfolk departed for war. The challenges that confronted these young women were daunting; the questions that plagued them, dispiriting. How would the family support itself? Could the family business remain afloat? How would children be reared in a household lacking a father's stern, but affectionate, presence? And when, if at all, would the couple be reunited? These questions – economic, familial and existential – dominated the daily thoughts of wartime couples and constituted the recurring themes of their correspondence. Letter-writing, the invisible thread that bound together the home front and the military front of every combatant nation, was an enterprise essential to the well-being of all wartime families: parents and sons, sisters and brothers, husbands and wives all maintained contact with one another through regular (and, in the case of many married couples, daily) correspondence. In the letters exchanged between husbands and wives we see an intense desire on the part of many (but not all) married soldiers to share with their wives descriptions of life at the front that paid attention to both the tedium of military life and its intermittent terror.¹² Beyond their desire to convey to their wives something meaningful about their existence in uniform, married soldiers also hoped that correspondence would allow them to remain connected to the humdrum realities of home life. As Jessica Meyer has observed of British soldiers, 'men found spaces in which they could present themselves to their families not only as soldiers, through

10 Catherine Dollard, 'Fräulein oder Frau? German women and the signification of title, 1850–1917', *Women's History Review*, 17:3 (2008), pp. 377–93.

11 Libraries and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), RG 13 A-2, vol. 208, file 92, 1917. Letter from Helen R. Y. Reid, Ladies Auxiliary, Montreal Patriotic Fund. Francesca Lagorio observes similar opposition in Italy when the state created the 'juridical figure of the assimilated widow . . . the unmarried companion of a fallen soldier'. Lagorio, 'Italian widows of the First World War', p. 183.

12 Important and illuminating though these often deeply unsettling descriptions of combat were, the confessional urge that informed them was not unique to married men in uniform. As Michael Roper and Helen McCartney have demonstrated, single men too shared such accounts with their families. Helen B. McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers: The Liverpool Territorials in the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester University Press, 2009).

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their descriptions of war experiences, but also as domestic men through their continuing involvement with domestic concerns'.¹³ They worried about the financial well-being of their families and the health of their wives and children. They discussed educational plans for young children and medical prognoses for ailing infants. They fretted that their wives were being worn down by the exigencies of wartime life on the home front. And they thought about sex. Correspondence during the Great War thus constituted the means by which husbands and wives worked to maintain the essential elements of married life: economic support, emotional compassion and sexual intimacy.

The ideal was to write every day, and for British, French and German couples, who could usually count on a letter being delivered within three days, the regularity of correspondence and the (reasonable) reliability of delivery allowed them to establish in their daily exchanges a conversational tone that replicated, albeit imperfectly, the intimacy of pre-war married life. A shared commitment to write every day (or, in some instances, every other day) was not, however, always easy to honour. When soldiers found themselves in the heat of battle, when military postal stations were arbitrarily closed, when an imminent offensive cancelled all mail delivery, husbands were hard pressed to keep their promise of a letter every day. When infants were teething, when the often futile search for food occupied most of a woman's waking hours (as became the reality in Germany and Austria in the last years of the war), when illness, fatigue and depression were ever present, wives, too, struggled to maintain the routine of daily correspondence. Husbands, fearful that they had been forgotten, occasionally took umbrage when their wives failed to write every day.¹⁴

Couples from the colonies contended with these challenges and more. Mail was dispatched to Canada only twice a week and during the height of German submarine warfare ships sailing the Atlantic were always at risk. Under ideal circumstances, a letter sent from (or to) Canada would be delivered in two weeks, but circumstances were rarely ideal and it was usual for a letter to take three weeks or more to reach its destination. Thus Canadian couples never enjoyed the luxury of quick and conversational exchange. A soldier's question posed in one letter – about the health of a sick child or the receipt of separation allowances – would not receive a reassuring answer for a month or more. And a wife's anxiety about her husband's very existence often persisted for

13 Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 45.

14 Christa Hämmerle, "'You let a weeping woman call you home?'" Private correspondences during the First World War in Austria and Germany', in Rebecca Earle (ed.), *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600–1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 161–2.