

Hutečka, Jiří: Men under Fire. Motivation, Morale and Masculinity among Czech Soldiers in the Great War, 1914-1918.

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The First World War, like most others, was mainly fought by men. While this seemed self-evident a generation ago, requiring no further comment, that is no longer the case when, as Jiří Hutečka puts it in *Men under Fire*, masculinity is now seen as a “highly performative construct” (p. 209). His monograph is not the first book to use masculinity in analysing the soldiers of the Great War (which has been a kind of laboratory for the social and cultural history of war over the past three decades). But it differs from previous studies in two key regards. First, he uses masculinity not to illuminate one aspect of the men’s experience (such as their emotions) but as an overarching concept to shed light on its totality. Here, masculinity takes the place of other recent paradigms, such as the violence of industrialised war or the dispute over whether coercion or consent shaped the men’s actions, though he is alive to these as well. Second, Hutečka deals with Czech soldiers. He tasks masculinity with explaining not just key aspects of the war affecting all soldiers (at least on the European fronts) but also with accounting for the particularity of one cohort, the 1.5 million soldiers from the Bohemian Crown Lands, a million of them Czech speakers. This large contingent (outnumbering the Australians and Canadians who fought with the British) has been under-studied and overshadowed by the post-war myths of the new Czechoslovakia which emphasised Czech dissidence or outright resistance to the Austro-Hungarian effort, myths incarnated by Hašek’s *The Good Soldier Švejk* (1921-23) and the national monument to the Czech Legionaries on Vítkov Hill, Prague (1928-38). It was long assumed on little evidence that Czech soldiers in the Imperial and Royal Army were lukewarm in their loyalty and prone to mutiny. While Pieter Judson, Laurence Cole and others have revised the overall picture of the Dual Monarchy’s resilience prior to 1914, and even its performance in the war, no study has tested this for Czech soldiers (Hutečka’s study thus complements Rudolf Kučera’s book on the war experience of the Bohemian working class).¹ The stakes are doubly high.

¹ *Kučera, Rudolf: Rationed Life. Science, Everyday Life and Working-Class Politics in the Bohemian Lands 1914-1918.* New York 2016.

In meeting his own challenge, Hutečka has written one of the most energetic and insightful studies of First World War soldiers in any army or country. Utilising the notion of “hegemonic masculinity” formulated by the Australian sociologist, Raewyn Connell, and developed by historians of gender such as John Tosh, he distinguishes a hierarchy of masculinities both between the military and civilian worlds and within the army, whose order and content evolved across the war. In so doing, he explains the readiness with which Czechs, like other Europeans, responded to military mobilisation in 1914 in terms of a “military manliness” inculcated through universal conscription and the cost to male prestige of seeming unwilling to fight in what everyone expected would be a short war, over “before the plums are ripe”. However, the passive endurance imposed by the long, industrialised siege of the Great War resulted in an experience of manliness that was the opposite of the action and conquest conventionally associated with soldiering. It was one of timelessness, dominated by basic survival in terms of food and shelter.

War overturned “hegemonic” masculinity in other ways, too. Men were subject to formal hierarchy and personal humiliation at the hands of officers, many of whom they may have judged inferior to themselves in civilian life. They also confronted their own physical and psychic limits in combat when machine guns and artillery shrapnel faced them quite impersonally with the prospect of their own destruction. Again, “hegemonic” notions of courage and supremacy were replaced by the grim but unheroic attributes of endurance and survival in the face of random carnage.

Soldiers were not, however, mere passive recipients of this unprecedented and unforeseen warfare. They accommodated the experience as best they could by adapting multiple subordinate masculinities. The “comradeship” of small homosocial groups allowed them to express a more “feminine” and caring side in safety. They kept intimate contact with women at home by mass letter-writing and furloughs, and sought to discharge their manliness as husbands, fathers and providers even at a distance. Dealing with these contradictory masculinities – soldier and civilian – was not the least of the strains imposed on men by the war. Unsurprisingly, relations with women were ambiguous. The sexual needs fulfilled in brothels or chance encounters behind the lines were the opposite of emotions aroused by “home”. They differed again from the potentially humiliating reliance of wounded and permanently handicapped men on women in the role of nurses. Hutečka is alert to differences of military rank and social class, as well as individual personality, in how these different masculinities (which he documents from private papers and published diaries and memoirs) articulated the soldiers’ experiences. Also important was how much soldiers were exposed to combat (as opposed to fulfilling logistical and organisational roles), for this conferred a new “patriarchal dividend”, that of the “front soldier”. It proved especially important for post-war veterans. All this is admirably caught by the explanatory power with which Hutečka deploys his conceptualisation of “masculinity”.

There remains the specificity of the Czech soldiers’ experience compared to that of other components of the Imperial and Royal Army or other national and imperial armies in the Great War. Hutečka’s explanation is two-fold. On the one hand, the Cisleithanian half of the Dual Monarchy faced a dramatic fall in living standards

from 1916. Soldiers (Czech and other) became hungry and exhausted as well as angry that their families at home (whom they were ostensibly protecting) seemed to be even worse off. On the other hand, the suspicions harboured by the High Command from the outset regarding the loyalty of the Czech soldiers became a self-fulfilling prophecy as the latter responded by assuming an overtly national identity. This begs several questions. Why did the army presume Czech disloyalty from the start? What were the components and content of the national identity affirmed by the soldiers? What do regimental and military justice records say about the strength and timing of its emergence? The answers would require different sources and perhaps a different conceptual framework. Masculinity cannot do all the work. But as Hutečka demonstrates, it can do a great deal of it.