



Maureen Healy. *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 333 Seiten \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-83124-6.

Reviewed by Alison Frank

Published on H-German (July, 2005)

Maureen Healy's *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I* is a refreshing and authoritative analysis of the Viennese home front during the Great War. It is a long-awaited addition to studies of other European cities in wartime, finally addressing the egregious neglect of Vienna represented by otherwise excellent works such as Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert's *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin, 1914-1919*.^[1] Using methodology reminiscent of Belinda Davis's study of everyday life in Berlin^[2] (a work the author herself credits for inspiration), Healy defines total war as a "war in which no action or deed was too small or insignificant to be considered a matter of state" (p. 3). She convincingly argues that the everyday activities of Vienna's citizens, including "average" (but, in her telling, no longer anonymous) women, children, and "left-at-home" men (as consumers, as entertainment seekers, as information gatherers), were political—and that understanding politics at this truly "domestic" level is critical to explaining the monarchy's failure to survive the war. "These everyday sites (shops, street corners, schools, pubs, apartment buildings)," she explains, "were more important than traditional political bodies (parliament, political parties, organized interest groups) for determining the course of the war in Vienna, in part because the latter were shut

down or restricted, creating a political vacuum" (p. 9). Rarely have the lives of normal people in normal places been so effectively brought to life—a task Healy accomplishes using thousands of letters, police reports, newspaper articles, denunciations, court records, censors' reports, petitions, leaflets and visual records of Vienna from 1914 to 1918.

Healy outlines for readers how wartime Viennese society became obsessed with the idea of the Enemy. Military leaders feared not only enemy soldiers, but also the demoralizing effects of news from the homefront—creating a conflict of interest between the war effort and families craving internal communication. Consumers resented not only enemy blockades, but also neighbors with whom they competed in a struggle for the same, very limited, resources. Rather than pulling together in a common effort to defeat an external enemy, deprivation (in particular of food and information) caused society to become atomized. Shared discomfort did not translate into shared cause, since "victimhood rooted in hunger made for a strange collective" in which "solidarity was fleeting" (p. 86).

Tensions caused by the scarcity of food are a case in point. Starvation, Healy notes, was the direct cause of between 7 and 11 percent of Viennese deaths during the war, and a contributing

cause in twenty to thirty percent of deaths (p. 41). Although each of the major belligerents faced challenges in providing its population with adequate food, a comparison of rations in London, Paris, Berlin, and Vienna shows that Vienna's situation was not only much worse than that of the Allied capitals, but, perhaps more surprisingly, also much worse than Berlin's. The imperial government tried to convince its citizens that the allied blockade amounted to a "Starvation War" (p. 36), an argument that most Viennese were initially willing to accept at face value. But before long, blame was extended beyond external enemies to Hungarians and farmers in the immediate vicinity of Vienna. While tension between Cis- and Trans-leithania is more likely to garner the attention of readers interested in evidence of centrifugal forces pulling at the *multinational* Empire, Healy demonstrates that Viennese wrath was just as furiously directed at Lower Austrian (i.e. "German") farmers (foreshadowing postwar tensions between urban and rural communities). Healy's meticulous archival research uncovered evidence of daily and often violent struggles over food, including what she has called the "potato war of 1918"--waged by irate (and hungry) Viennese women and children (with the support of soldiers on leave in Vienna) against farmers in the surrounding region. During this outbreak, in late June 1918, officials estimated that 30,000 Viennese, outraged at proposed reductions in rations and a shortage of potatoes, left the city and headed by train and on foot into the countryside. Once there, they reportedly threatened to burn down the homes of farmers unwilling to sell their potato crops (p. 55).

Viennese were convinced that the problem with food supply lay not with insufficient production, but rather incompetent and unjust distribution. They imagined that there was plenty of food in Hungary, plenty of food in the countryside, and plenty of food in the larders of their well-to-do neighbors. Newspaper reports of the assassination of the ever-unpopular Prime Minister Strgkh

dwelled on the details of the elaborate meal he had been enjoying immediately prior to being shot (p. 32). But the privileges of wealth were often suspected even when they were not as obvious as the luxury of dining in fine hotel restaurants. As Healy writes, "in multinational Vienna, 'richness' was more than a purely economic matter; it often included a national or ethnic component" (pp. 61-62). Healy's conclusion that suspicion frequently had a national flavor echoes a common conviction among many scholars today that even where Austrian citizens had multiple, overlapping identities, national identities took precedence over others in their own minds. Healy chooses to highlight denunciations of "Vienna's Czech-speaking residents by German-speakers as a case study," suggesting that doing so enables her to "examine the pernicious effects of denunciation on morale and civic cohesion on the home front" (p. 151). Her analysis certainly does that--there is no doubt that perceived "Czechness" was both contested and a source of tension that many German Catholics in Austria assumed conflicted with Habsburg loyalty (ignoring, for the time being, the extent to which their own German identity was incompatible with Habsburg loyalty). Confident conclusions about the role of perceived national identity in contributing to social atomization, however, would require a parallel discussion of denunciations made without reference to language or nationality--of which there are many examples in Healy's book. It is possible that by highlighting those denunciations that refer specifically to Czech national sentiment, the significance of German/Czech tension becomes unduly prominent. One also wonders if German Catholic denouncers prided themselves primarily on their loyalty to the Habsburg dynasty, the Austrian State, or the German nation. It would theoretically be possible for German-speaking Austrians to desire a victory for the Central Powers *and* a dismantling of the Austro-Hungarian Empire--in what sense, then, are they good citizens turning in bad neighbors?

When Healy notes in passing that the number of Czechs living in Vienna has been estimated to be anywhere between 100,000 (according to the official 1910 census) and 500,000 (p. 152), she reveals that not only counting Czechs, but also defining "Czech" was difficult. "When employed by German denouncers," she writes, "'Czech' was a slippery term used interchangeably with 'Slav,' 'serbophile,' 'russophile,' or as a catchword for anyone suspected of weak or non-existent loyalty to Austria" (p. 153). In one case in which Healy discovered not only a letter denouncing a woman who owned a butcher shop as a "Bohemian" but also the denounced woman's response to the accusation, we find that she was born in Croatia/Slavonia. The conflict between the denouncer and the butcher was not, then, ultimately about the latter's national identity and imperial loyalty, which the accuser was poorly qualified to measure. Rather, readers are left with the sense of a city torn apart by suspicion based on any and all perceived differences—whether national, political, economic, or simply imagined access to rare comforts.

In a community in which anyone might be a profiteer, black marketer, denouncer, hoarder, glutton or other hidden enemy, it comes as no surprise that by the second half of the war, "Rudeness, envy and violence, manifestations to some degree of hunger itself, marked civilians' interactions with each other" (p. 77). One does not need to call on national identity and dissonance to paint a convincing picture of a city torn apart at the seams, lacking any kind of sense of community, national or otherwise. A story in the newspaper *Der Morgen* in May 1918, lamented the lack of cohesion among Viennese: "I'm afraid of my landlady. I could just as well have said the cleaning lady, the coffeehouse waiter, the greengrocer, any bureaucrat, tram conductor or barber. I see this cold, compassionless hatred between people all around" (p. 157). Is Vienna, then, a city characterized by national hatred and torn apart by the burden of multi-nationality? Or a city torn apart by hatred, period, with "national" being only one of

dozens of possible modifiers? Viennese did not have to speak with an accent or have a Slavic surname to become targets of suspicion—all they had to do was fail to show adequate signs of suffering. In addition to Hungarians, Czechs, Jews, Galician refugees, the mayor, and local farmers, Viennese consumers suspected local neighborhood shopkeepers, wealthy merchants and their cronies in the *Zentralen*, Viennese men whose outward appearance suggested they should be at the front, and even soldiers on leave, who, it was believed, were prone to begging and seducing young women (p. 273).

Although Healy traces many of the city's difficulties to the lack of a coherent *Staatsidee*, suggesting that nation-states who could call on loyalty to the Nation as a reason to support the State had an advantage over the Habsburg Empire, much of her evidence suggests a disintegration that was caused by the hardship of the war and the inability of the state to serve the needs of its citizens—not because it was multinational, but rather because it was marginally incompetent. The *Zentralen* that she cites as targets of suspicion, for example, were modeled after the German system of exchanges to facilitate the organization of wartime production and distribution of essential goods. In the Austrian case, however, the *Zentralen*, which Healy calls "a haphazard collection of cartels" (p. 12), were largely ineffective. In many industries they were not only founded too late in the war (the Petroleum *Zentrale*, for example, was not established until October, 1916!), but they were also prevented from meaningful organization by the requirement that administration be shared by Austrian and Hungarian civil authorities in addition to the military. One representative of the Ministry of War joked that the *Zentralen* should more accurately be called the *Dezentralen*.^[3] Healy represents these cartels as a missed opportunity to manage the distribution of both food and information about food effectively. As it was, consumers focused anger on any representative of the government that they could find, including Vi-

enna's hapless mayor, Richard Weiskirchner, who truly bore little responsibility for national food policy.

The ceaseless search for people, groups and institutions to blame for hunger, confusion, and general misery is one of the main themes running through both of the book's two main parts. The first three chapters focus on politics and representation. Here Healy attributes "the social disintegration in Vienna to shortage of two key commodities: food and reliable information" (p. 26). Healy's first chapter, outlining the food politics that are described above, contains some of the most compelling material in the book—based as it is on astute and careful analysis of a dazzling array of primary source material. She leaves no room for doubt that food shortages were a (if not the) key component in growing civilian intolerance of the war and the administration running it.

The second chapter, on entertainment and propaganda, builds on research done by Mark Cornwall.^[4] Healy restricts her study to the kind of officially sanctioned entertainment designed to lend greater meaning to the war—that is, propaganda disguised as entertainment that "sought to draw civilians' attentions away from their own stomachs and focus them on the larger, transcendent events of a world war" (p. 87). She carefully analyzes the Vienna War Exhibition of 1916-1917, which drew over half a million visitors in its first two months (p. 88). The exhibition was intended to convince visitors that their suffering had meaning and should be understood as a willing sacrifice—inferior, but still parallel, to the sacrifice being made by men at the front. The Vienna War Exhibition, it was hoped, would prove a self-fulfilling prophecy—by showing Viennese the ways in which they contributed to the larger war effort, it would encourage a continued commitment. The hall of the War Relief Office is representative of the challenges faced by authorities with this goal in mind. The display noted the enormous aggregate numbers of donations by a population that had been

mobilized early on to give—the donation of 1,280,086 pairs of socks, for example, was proudly displayed as proof of eager service. Not mentioned in the display, Healy notes, was the fact that the War Relief Office had been forced to respond to widespread theft of collection tins by tethering them down with chains.

The third chapter outlines the demoralizing effect of a profound lack of reliable information in the imperial capital. "Truth" (or "accurate information") is treated much as a commodity that should be available and efficiently distributed. Its absence in Vienna "contributed to social atomization by denying Viennese residents a psychological common ground" (p. 122). By considering three parallel types of information flows: the propaganda directed at the population by the state, rumors circulating among the population, and denunciations made by the population to the state, Healy reminds us that communication was multivalent and multidirectional. The state, she concludes, did not have an effective policy for fostering supra-national loyalty, and relied on proxies (the Catholic Church and the independent press) to buoy support for the war. Her discussion of the challenges facing censors leaves the reader wondering if information management had any chance of working. Possibly more effective in policing behavior (and certainly more damaging to community cohesion) were countless written denunciations (hundreds of which Healy reviewed in police and Lower Austrian regional archives). Here, too, we are reminded that the war did not simply pit the state against its citizenry, but also turned a community of Viennese sufferers into persecutors and victims.

In the second half of the book, Healy places the family at the center of attempts to mobilize civilians for total war and of plans to reconstruct a social and moral order in the war's aftermath. In chapters 4, 5, and 6, Healy focuses on women, children, and men, respectively, each of whom suffered from a disjuncture between the image of

their social role and the reality of their lived experience. Women, who, according to widespread expectations and official propaganda, were supposed to be loving, nurturing, and supportive—in short, "'selfless' beings imbued with love" (p. 173) did not live up to the state's expectations of sacrifice and support. In Vienna, which was "characterized by acts of betrayal of women by women, personal and political sabotage, and woman-on-woman violence," women acted not on behalf of the State, nor of women, but rather of themselves alone (p. 167). Viennese children—malnourished, poorly educated, and inclined to adopt their parents' prejudices—could not measure up to the sacrifices of *Heldenkinder* like Rosa Zench, the "girl hero from Rawa Ruska"(today Rava-Rus'ka) who lost a leg bringing water to soldiers at the front. (As an aside, I cannot help but wonder if the girl's "strange dialect that even Polish-speaking doctors in Vienna could not initially decipher" (p. 230) might not very well have been Ukrainian.) Healy reminds us that the same men who, in their public roles, appear in standard histories as powerful agents of political change had private lives as well—lives in which their very presence in Vienna (as opposed to on the front) made them targets of suspicion and, in many cases, abuse. The head of the Food Office, Hans Loewenfeld-Russ, could insist that women were not "experts in matters of food policy" in an attempt to elevate his own professional authority at the same time that he privately expressed to his wife the fear that service on the front might be "preferable to this unworthy business at a desk" (pp. 63 and 271). If his physical appearance reflected general good health, he could certainly expect to see the latter sentiment mirrored in the faces of his fellow Viennese.

Healy's intelligent and thorough analysis of the Viennese home front is sure to inspire further research that could answer two lingering questions raised by her study. The first relates to the viability of the Viennese community before the outbreak of war. Healy's book tells a poignant story of neighbors turning against one another and

against their government. How does the lack of a sense of common cause or common urban identity that she describes compare to the pre-war period? How representative are the three Czech-speaking workers in a Viennese factory who wrote in October, 1915, "Until now all the nations tolerated each other, [but] since the beginning of the week we have been persecuted [*angefeindet*] by the German workers" (p. 265)? Did expressions of national jealousy and resentment caused by wartime impoverishment build on already existing tensions in Vienna's bakeries and butcher shops? Or were these fault lines caused by the war? This problem extends beyond the imperial capital throughout the Empire as a whole. In Galicia, many Ukrainian-speakers looked to Vienna as a source of assistance against Polish oppression before 1914. Once the war began, however, Imperial authorities suspected any and all Ruthenians (as Ukrainian-speaking Austrian citizens were then called) of pro-Russian sympathies, disregarding many official and unofficial expressions of patriotism. To what extent did the wartime State, by treating its various citizens differently according to the relative degree of loyalty it expected from their respective national groupings, reinforce the very national affiliations that are credited with its demise? One recent study of Lviv suggests that Polish- and Ukrainian-speaking citizens who got along in peace turned against one another during the war, reacting in part to their differentiated treatment by both Russian and Austrian "occupying forces." [5] Before we can fully assess causal relationships between the strains of war and the dissolution of the community, we will need to have a comparable examination of everyday life and communal identity in Vienna and in the Empire that extends beyond the chronological scope of Healy's study.

The second unanswered question relates to the specificity of Vienna. How does Vienna compare to the panoply of other cities in Austria-Hungary? Healy points out that hungry Viennese often targeted complaints and remonstrations at the

city government (in particular Mayor Weiskirchner) rather than the Austrian State or the Emperor (p. 58)—did Austrian citizens across the imperial territories see their problems as local, municipal, communal? To what extent is anger directed at a city mayor indicative of a loss of legitimacy of the Empire as a whole? Prague and Graz—as large provincial Cisleithanian capitals that remained in imperial control throughout the course of the war—would provide the most obvious parallels. In Prague, public manifestations of popular discontent (protests, riots, lawbreaking) did not become widespread until 1917-1918—only in the latter half of the war was there any meaningful wartime resistance.[6] The wartime experience of citizens of Lviv (then Lemberg)—a city in which one out of every sixth marriage was "nationally" mixed[7]—was colored not only by official treatment by the Austrian government as an occupied territory, but also a Russian occupation that lasted the better part of a year. Comparative studies of these cities, in addition to Krakw, Brno (Brnn), Maribor (Marburg an der Drau), and others would enable the extension of analysis beyond individual cities to the urban environment in the Austrian Empire more broadly. (For an Austro-Hungarian perspective, one would have to include Budapest, Bratislava (Pressburg) and other cities in Hungary as well.) These questions are beyond the scope of the present study—but the information that Healy's monograph contains will prove indispensable in working toward their answers.

Thanks to meticulous research, a refreshing methodological approach, careful analysis, and graceful prose, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire* is a truly excellent book. It should be required reading for anyone interested in Austria-Hungary or the First World War. Because it adds to our understanding of modern European social, cultural, gender, urban, family, and economic history, it will appeal to a wide audience. In part due to an admirable use of specific examples and individual case histories, it is accessible enough even for those undergraduates who demand all read-

ings should be "page-turners." It should also mark an end of the era in which analyses of the war that treat London, Paris and Berlin can ignore Vienna (or, for that matter, St. Petersburg).

Notes

[1]. Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert, eds. *Capital Cities at War. Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[2] Belinda Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

[3]. Robert Wegs, *Die sterreichische Kriegswirtschaft 1914-1918* (Vienna: Schendl, 1979), p. 131.

[4]. Mark Cornwall, *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary: The Battle for Hearts and Minds* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

[5]. Philipp Ther, "War versus Peace: Interethnic Relations in Lviv during the First Half of the Twentieth Century," in *Lviv: A City in the Crosscurrents of Culture*, ed. John Czaplicka (Cambridge: Ukrainian Research Institute, Harvard University 2004), p. 254.

[6]. Joshua Kysiak, "Reluctant Dissenters: War, Hunger and Resistance in World War One Prague" (MA Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2002), pp. 50-51, 59.

[7]. Ther, pp. 257-260.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Alison Frank. Review of Healy, Maureen. *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. July, 2005.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10780>

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.