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ČLOVEK VO VOJNE

Stratégia prežitia a sociálne dôsledky prvej svetovej vojny na Slovensku

[PEOPLE AT WAR

Survival strategies and social consequences
of the First World War in Slovakia]

Bratislava: Veda, Historický ústav SAV, 326 p.

The book describes and analyses the social consequences of the First World War within present-day Slovakia, in the contexts of what used to be the Kingdom of Hungary and the Habsburg Monarchy. The author considers numerous social facts and events that emerged because of the war or that were a feature of the wartime life of the country and its people.

What an ethnologist appreciates when reading the text is the great variety of sources used. Beside the “usual” archive sources less commonly used ones, such as materials from the office for postal censorship, analysis of instruments of propaganda and especially personal sources – so called ego-documents: correspondence, diaries and memoirs – as well as the recorded and transcribed memoirs of war veterans enlarge the database of the book. The author’s use of personalized qualitative research justifies the ethnological data. An additional bonus is the analysis of the attitudes of those who lived during this period – sociological surveys of contemporary soldiers and children, children’s wartime drawings and other sources.

The focus of the book is on both the long and short-term consequences of the war and the variety of people from different social classes bearing witness to their experiences. Crises and dangers both at the frontline and the home front,

reactions to the immediate risk to life, together with or mixed up with conformity, social revolt, criminal offences, spying among civilians, those activities reactions, denunciations are understood and explained in the context and motivation of the actors.

Questions of loyalty to the regime are closely connected with ethnic belonging. The identity feelings burst out especially when confronted with the power of the “homeland”. Following the radicalisation of people’s attitudes, the author stresses not only acts of rebellion but also the standpoint of the “silent” majority as far as regime acceptance is concerned.

The book is arranged thematically and chronologically. One of the analytical questions it poses is, what happened to this “God-fearing” nation, meaning Slovaks, during the war years of the war. The book follows the process of changes of mood, which gave rise to rebellious dissatisfaction and widespread demands for the dissolution of Austro-Hungary gradually appeared on the Slovak side. Interestingly it contradicts the myth of the enthusiastic acceptance of and support for the Austro-Hungarian regime by the people. Passive acceptance of the military regime gradually increased from criticism to disapproval and rebellion. The author explains the reasons for fostering the myth as a part of the politics of memory of Czechoslovakia. The basic motivation for ordinary soldiers, regardless of ethnicity, was not only to obey orders and military discipline, but also personal survival. This meant that desertion or voluntary capture was a politically motivated idea, so it occurred only to minimum extent if at all...

A new and important finding of the book is that ethnicity was not the most important factor in rousing anti-war feeling. The erosion of loyalty was rooted in social injustice, abuse of power by local officers, the inefficient supply system and the pessimistic war news. The character of the Hungarian regime, the repression exercised by the security authorities from the very beginning against the ethnic political elite, resulted in the latter adopting a mode of passive resistance mode. A very important feature of the wartime experience was the censorship of military correspondence. This is brought out by the author’s findings but not many original documents speak of the “moods” of the population as an important source of studying the loyalty of individual nations within the Habsburg Monarchy. Dudeková analyses in detail the so-called Slovak language group, in which she finds the key objective of Slovak censorship in Vienna was to hide from the attention of the high command and create a space for the preparation of the future division of the state.

From an ethnographic perspective, the most interesting section of the book is the chapter devoted to everyday life on the home front. State-controlled supply, emergency measures, rationing supported by the idea of sacrifice and the great disparity between the propaganda and the reality are the topics discussed here. It is also interesting to follow the consequences of the war on different

groups of people, particularly women and children. Memoirs, oral accounts and correspondence show the diverse and contradictory nature of the first-hand experience of war.

This book is to be welcomed for helping us to understand the historical framework of what ethnology dealt with earlier – the personal memoirs, methods of survival as remembered by “ordinary people”. It helps our understanding of governmental, official, state practices, the propaganda, myths and ideology, as opposed to “bread and butter” issues and sorry stories of young and old who lifelong bore the symbolic as well as physical scars caused by the Great War.

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