# The impact of WWI on marriages, divorces and

# gender relations in Europe

## A conference and an edited volume

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The First World War is often thought to have had positive implications for gender equality and the position of women in Europe (cf. e.g. Dumont *et al*. 1981; Thébaud 2014; Gubin and De Smaele 2015; Timm and Sandborn 2016: 131). Historians have made the argument that alongside the misery it invoked, warfare in the early twentieth-century in Europe functioned as a catalyst for female emancipation. Women would have gained more autonomy and greater gender equality as war shook up societies in ways that gave women more prominence and crucial roles in the economies of their home countries. Increased gender equality expressed itself in different ways, at different levels, with the suffragettes claiming voting rights for women and the “flappers” with their boyish hairdos and short skirts as the most compelling examples. In subsequent debates over the extent to which women experienced these liberties, regardless of their social and economic position in society, however, it has been argued that emancipatory gains were very short-lived, and that, in fact, we cannot speak of a liberalization movement of women. On this view, for women across the board, war had but negative consequences (cf. Timm and Sandborn 2016: 132).

The question whether or not WWI can really be thought of as a breaking or turning point in history that had a lasting impact on gender relations thus remains unresolved. It also remains opaque whether change was adopted by a broad range of men and women, or rather only by groups with a specific war history, or with certain socio-economic characteristics.

As demography is concerned with marital and family relationships, and demographic data tend to cover broad groups in society, historical demography is well-placed to shed light on these questions. Since patterns of marriage and divorce are intricately linked with couple dynamics and gender relations at the micro-level, evidence on marriage dynamics in particular provides excellent material for a bottom up perspective on the question how war impacted on gender relations. Demographic perspectives, however, have been conspicuously absent in this historical debate. Thus far, most historians, sociologists, and demographers have shied away from studying the first half of the twentieth century. While, for some countries, we have empirical information about the general patterns (cf. Henry, 1966; Festy, 1984; Winter, 1992; Eggerickx, 2014; Brée *et al*., 2016a, 2016b), even the most basic trends are surprisingly understudied for many others (cf. Kok and Van Bavel 2010). Currently, the increased (and still increasing) availability of data for this period provides unique opportunities to look into patterns of family formation and dissolution, and ask what these might tell us about the dynamics of gender relations before, during, and after the Great War.

In this volume, we would like to start with a chapter that takes a broad perspective in discussing gender relations as well as couple and household dynamics in Europe in the period before, during, and after WWI (1900-1930). This chapter shall discuss gender relations in the light of (changing) social, economic, institutional, and legal contexts and highlight the potential impact of WWI.

Subsequently, we would like to compare European countries with different war trajectories regarding practices of and changes in the prevalence of marriage, in marriage ages, in the socioeconomic similarities and differences between marriage partners, and in practices of divorce and separation. How did these evolve during the early twentieth century? And what role did, or did not, WWI play in these evolutions? Are there differences according to heterogeneous war experiences of countries or regions? Is there evidence of female empowerment in marriage patterns, in the ages at which women married and in the types of partners they chose, and in patterns of divorce? And how did the development of male marriage patterns relate to that of women? We invite both more quantitatively and more qualitatively oriented papers – the latter drawing, e.g., on diaries, (love)letters, birth announcement cards, obituary notices, and other private or household accounts.

We invite authors to look into four aspects of marriage and divorce that could shed light on these questions. In doing so, we encourage authors of quantitative chapters to link their work to the overall theme of gender relations, and to integrate qualitative material in their discussions of quantitative findings on marriage, divorce (and separation), and remarriage.

First, we are interested in papers looking into the question whether the pattern of decreasing first marriage ages, which has been seen as an expression of increasing familiarization and separation of gender spheres, persists (Matthijs 2002). Did this nineteenth-century trend that had emphasized the role of women as wives, mothers and caretakers continue, or did the war form a breaking point, with ages at first marriage increasing again? With large samples, the evolution of standard deviations, furthermore, is informative as to how strict cultural norms regarding age at first marriage remained. That is, the greater the variation in ages at first marriage, the less strict marriage norms are.

Second, age differences between marriage partners are informative about power dynamics between couples. Women marrying a partner much older than themselves had lower bargaining power than their counterparts who were married to a man of more or less the same or younger age. Regardless of where we ought to place the causes of changes, trends in the age differential between partners for the period 1900-1930 can shed light on gender dynamics within households. A decrease in age gaps between men and women, with marriage ages rising faster for women than for men, could be seen as evidence of female emancipation (cf. Carmichael 2011), or as a phenomenon paving the way for it. In conjunction, we may ask whether trends in ages at marriage and spousal age gaps developed similarly across socio-economic groups, or whether the shape and the pace of change differed between social groups.

Third, we invite contributions addressing the question whether the war opened up geographic horizons and created opportunities for lasting, intimate intercultural relations. Do women and men more than before marry partners from abroad? What are the characteristics of intercultural couples, and do these changes over time? Does a gendered analysis show differences between men and women, or did the world “open up” in similar ways for men and women? Furthermore, did the Great War lead to shifting geographies of marriage within countries, as people adjusted to new orders and changed economic realities?

Fourth, both divorce and separation may shed light on the extent to which women in the interbellum were able to live independent lives. First, we may ask how likely it was for women to separate or divorce from their husbands. Were there changes in the frequency with which separation and divorce occurred, in the characteristics (socio-economic status, age, etc.) of women who separated or divorced, and in the share of women that remarried after divorce and in the pace at which they did so? Was change more intense for women than for men, or was it not?

Finally, levels and paces of remarriage after widowhood provide another way to approach the question whether WWI fostered greater independency among women. Might widening standard deviations, for example, be suggestive of less strict norms surrounding paces of remarriage after the loss of a partner in post-WWI Europe, or of increasing economic resilience among women? Discussion of these questions requires consideration of the possible role of changing marriage markets and the interplay of structure and agency in shaping the interaction between WWI and gender relations. The theme also asks for discussion of qualitative sources that may unveil how societies looked towards women without a husband in the interbellum, and what heterogeneity according to time and place there was.

In considering the impact of WWI on marriages, divorces and gender relations, we aim to provide a balanced mix of European countries in the chapters of the edited volume. We are particularly (though not exclusively) interested in contributions about Belgium, Germany, Poland, France, and the UK, as well as in countries that were not directly engaged in WWI and can provide contrast by comparison (e.g. The Netherlands). We welcome authors to compare several countries in a single paper.

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