Up to 2 million civilians in the Austro-Hungarian Empire were internally displaced between 1914 and 1918, the equivalent number of displaced civilians in France for the same period and almost a third of the total displaced in Russia before 1917.¹ This chapter shows how the displacement of Austria-Hungary’s wartime refugees from the eastern and southern peripheries of the empire contributed both to the empire’s collapse and to the legitimacy of post-imperial successor states in East Central Europe. It argues that by creating social and economic categories – nationality, religion and class – the multinational state unwittingly nationalized its own citizens and gave legitimacy to nationalists who sought to claim non-national people for their political projects of liberation from imperial rule. Not only the state and its agencies, but also the various groups and politicians who sought to represent the refugees as co-nationals, each claimed the displaced. International actors after the war also made claims on the displaced as part of their larger humanitarian mission in the region. Therefore, the discourses about and responses to wartime displacement – what Peter Gatrell has called ‘refugeedom’ in the case of Tsarist Russia – were the very process by which the empire itself was displaced and replaced by nationalizing successor states.²

**Forced migrations in a total war**

The link between population displacement and war is self-evident for the second part of the twentieth century, but it has less often been
recognized as a feature of the First World War. More recent studies of the Great War have established the relationship between total war, displacement and political upheavals such as revolutions or imperial collapse. In these accounts, the displacement of populations is a precondition for the displacement of whole states and their replacement with radical and often violent political ideologies and movements. The Paris peace treaties that concluded the war were merely a full stop to the process of moving, sorting, classifying and removing populations that had begun in 1914. Making war and peace was no longer principally about gaining or losing territory, but about populating or depopulating territorially contested spaces. As Eric Weitz has argued, belligerent countries fought wars on territorial fronts while simultaneously fighting for legitimacy over populations within their borders:

What had started as a war between states swiftly became also a war among peoples. In the course of the conflict, the goals of the belligerents became ever more expansive and went way beyond the conquest of territory or self-defense. Germany’s imagined Mitteleuropa contained within it an understanding of discrete populations, some of which might be allied with Germany, while others, notably Slavs, were slighted for economic exploitation and subjugation to a German elite.

Like Germany, Austria-Hungary also imagined a political space in which German-speakers ruled over non-German-speakers, but it was the sudden displacement of populations from the fringes of the empire that turned this imagined space into a legal entity framed by ethnic and civic notions of citizenship. Thus, the ‘entanglement’ of civilizing missions and forced migrations was present in the Habsburg domain, just as it was elsewhere in the multinational empires that collapsed in 1918 and in the international system of nation-states that came to replace them.

Austria-Hungary’s war began on two fronts in 1914 – against Serbia in the Balkans and against Russia in the east – but with the entry of Italy into the war in May 1915 fighting was on all three fronts. Miscalculating the speed of Russian mobilization, the Austro-Hungarian military command initially sent divisions to Serbia and then immediately had to redeploy them to Galicia to fight off a swift Russian invasion at the end of August. The result was defeat on both sides: with Austro-Hungarian troops departing from the Balkan front before they had even fought, Serbia won early victories in 1914 and suffered defeat only at the hands