In a scene from the 1916 film, *Wien im Krieg (Vienna in War)* a doctor gives new recruits a medical examination, or a *Musterung*. Although this was standard procedure at the time, in the context of the First World War, this *Musterung* was invested with additional eugenic significance by the film.\(^1\) The purpose of the examination was to reassure the viewers that the soldier fighting the enemy in the trenches was the nation’s finest man, the personification of physical and mental strength. The eugenic dichotomy between “fit” and “unfit” individuals was thus conveyed with artistic vision, albeit one informed by the authority of medical sciences. “Dear Fatherland, rest assured!”, read the message on the screen, once a muscular and healthy man has been examined and accepted for military service.\(^2\)

The reality was, however, starkly different to the buoyant optimism portrayed by the film.\(^3\) Nearly 800,000 Austro-Hungarian soldiers died until the spring of 1915.\(^4\) Although the military situation improved, following victories over the Russian army in July and August, the Austro-Hungarian casualties continued to rise, adding another half a million men by the end of 1915.\(^5\) The subsequent Russian offensive of June 1916 further lost the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy another 1.5 million men (including 400,000 taken prisoner), making it painfully clear that the nation’s best were being heroically sacrificed in the trenches. Moreover, when Hungary’s hitherto neutral neighbours Italy and Romania entered the war on the side of the Entente in 1915 and 1916 respectively, it became increasingly apparent that the war was fought less to avenge the death of an Austrian prince and more to ensure territorial and national aggrandizement. Not surprisingly, then, two years into the war, the Austro-Hungarian governments were forced to accept the conscription of reservists and militarily untrained civilians,
a practice which, in turn, contributed to the lowering of physical standards of those men drafted into the army, the elimination of several categories of exemption, and the extension of military obligation from the ages of 21–42 to 18–50. Fashioned by warfare and the spectre of racial degeneration, physical fitness had become the very foundation of the nation’s military prowess.

As will be discussed in this chapter, after the outbreak of the war, concerns with the deterioration of the nation’s health dominated the government’s social and medical agenda. With every passing month of the war, public health and medical experts and doctors deplored not only the loss of human life inflicted by the war, but also its devastating consequences for the combatant nations and their civilians. These experts laboured widely to translate their knowledge into practical policies, whether it was the control of epidemics, campaigns against the spread of venereal diseases, the protection of mothers and infants or the social reintegration of injured soldiers and veterans. Statistics of military and civilian health were indeed demoralizing. According to the Austrian bacteriologist Clemens Pirquet, infectious diseases and other health problems caused by the war affected approximately 3.2 million people in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy alone. For example, over a million were infected with syphilis and other venereal diseases, 430,000 from tuberculosis and 330,000 from malaria. Records kept by the Clinic of Dermatology and Venereology affiliated to the Royal Hungarian University of Science in Budapest indicated that 9 per cent of the city’s total population was infected with venereal diseases in 1915. This number increased to 16 per cent in 1916 and 26 per cent in 1918.

Engaging with these problems, venereologists like Zsigmond Somogyi, Tamás Marschalkó and Dezső Hahn, and the pathologist Béla Entz, among others, outlined the complicated relationship between the spread of pathogens, living conditions and the environment. These experts warned the military authorities and the government that official campaigns against sexually transmitted diseases and epidemics were not only needed in order to protect civilian health but they were also essential to the post-war reconstruction process. Moreover, as the realities of war began impacting on all spheres of domestic life and work in Hungary, new medical and social concerns arose. The physiologist Géza Farkas and the neurologist Károly Schaffer, for instance, were equally concerned about nutrition during the war or with side-effects such as neurasthenia. The pharmacist Lajos Száhlender, on the other hand, acrimoniously described the war as a