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**ALEXANDER WATSON,
*THE FORTRESS: THE SIEGE OF PRZEMYSL
AND THE MAKING OF EUROPE'S BLOODLANDS,*
NEW YORK 2020, PP. 400**

Introduction

The book tells the story of one fortress-city that was pitched into the calamity and on which for a few months early in the First World War, the fate of all Eastern and Central Europe rested. The city was called Przemyśl. Today, it lies in Poland's sleepy southeastern corner on the Modern border with Ukraine. At the state of the twentieth century, however, it belonged to the Habsburg Empire, a sprawling dynastic state which for centuries had ruled over an amazingly diverse and colorful population in the center of Europe.

About the Author

Alexander Watson, born 12 July 1979, is a British historian. He is the author of three books, which focus on East-Central Europe, Germany and British during the World War I. His most recent book, *The Fortress*; was praised by *The Times* newspaper as a "master piece". He is currently Professor of History at Goldsmiths University of London. He was awarded the Wolfson History Prize (2014), and Guggenheim-Lehrman Prize in Military History (2014).

About the book

THE FORTRESS: The Siege of Przemyśl and the making of Europe's Bloodlands was written by Alexander Watson and published by Basic Books, an imprint of Perseus Books, LLC, a subsidiary of Hachette Book Group Inc. 1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY in February 2020. The book tells a historic story set during the World War I. The book tells a historic story that ushered in World War I. It has 4 maps, 34 images of events and people recorded in the book, and 4 text illustrations.

Context/Review

The city of Przemyśl, like most people living in the Habsburg Empire, had not expected the outbreak of European war. Of course, the assassination of the imperial heir and his wife in Sarajevo at the end of June had been widely reported and local press pondered darkly whether Russia had a hand in it, but nobody could imagine that the death of one man, even a man so important as Archduke Franz Ferdinand, could end nearly half a century of peace. The peasantry in the surrounding villages were too busy preparing for the harvest to bother about anything so abstract as conflict between the Great Powers.

The Habsburg army deployed more than two thirds of its strength, around 1.2 million men, in Galicia that August. The soldiers were drawn from across the empire, and many passed through Przemyśl. Although Habsburg first celebrated their victory over the Russians, at Krasnik, 150 kilometers to the north in Tsarist Poland that August; at the end of August, the news became less good masses of wounded arrived in train loads of intensely suffering humanity in misery.

There, the capital of Galicia just 90 kilometer east of Przemyśl, ruled a chaos not seen since the invasions of the Tartars in the sixteenth century. The city's mayor, the provincial authorities, and the bank officials had all fled. Both the rule of law and food supply had collapsed. Przemyśl's residents listened to these accounts with horror. Yet it was worse when, after September 1, the refugee trains stopped arriving. Words went around that Przemyśl was now the end of the line. Lwow had fallen. This unofficial news opened what was later called "the times of panic". Anyone with money or connections beyond the city scrambled to get out. The Fortress command announced a compulsory evacuation for September 4.

The challenges General Conrad Von Hotzendorf faced in preparing Emperor Franz Joseph's army for war were unquestionably formidable. The general staff chief made repeated rabid demands for the empire to launch preemptive war. These had brought him into conflict with the Emperor's foreign minister, Alois Lexa Count Achrenthal, and had eventually led to his dismissal in November

1911. He was brought back just over a year later as crisis overtook the Balkans. He still favored the irrational idea five years later in spite of disapproval from both diplomats and the Emperor. He focused particularly on two opponents who harbored irredentist ambitions for Habsburg territory, believing conflict with them to be inevitable: Italy, though a Habsburg ally, yet the Habsburg “hereditary enemy”, was the first of his bug bearers, and Serbia.

Conrad not only recklessly advocated war, but also failed to prepare the imperial army for the coming confrontation. He had plans for war with Italy, Serbia, and Russia, as well as for combinations of these powers. To meet all eventualities during a mobilization, Conrad divided his army into three echelons. Through hesitancy and reluctance to confront the realities of a two-front war, Conrad left the empire's northeastern frontier frighteningly exposed to Russian attack. His first grave mistake was to order deployment against Serbia the country he wanted to fight and, with characteristic wishful thinking, to persist in this course even after Russia's intention to intervene became undeniable.

Years before the war, Conrad and Moltke had tentatively discussed a joint concentric offensive from Galicia and East Prussia to encircle the Russians. On August 3, 1914, with the bulk of German army deploying against Belgium and France, Moltke ruled it out. Without German cooperation, Conrad's attack was a push into the ether.

The Habsburg army displayed almost superhuman courage in this early fighting, but it was outnumbered and, crucially, heavily outgunned. Russian divisions fielded sixty guns to the Habsburg divisions' forty-eight. Their artillery men were more skilled too. The Tsarist force had absorbed many lessons from humiliating defeat at the hands of the Japanese in the war of 1904–1905, among them the importance of combined arms operations. Its field regulations stressed the dominance of firepower in combat, and its artillery was expected to work closely with forward infantry to support any advance.

The Habsburg army's tactical doctrine exacerbated the problem. In peacetime, Conrad had enjoyed a reputation as a tactical genius, although his ideas about how to balance fire and movement, the most important military debate of the period, had barely developed since 1890, when he had first put them in print. The toxic combination of inadequate fire support and a tactical doctrine encouraging impetuous rushes directly at the enemy brought horrendous loss of life when it was tested on the battlefield in the autumn of 1914.

The keystone of Przemysl's defensive system were the forts. A tour of Fort I, “Salis-Soglio”, irreverently known as “Aunt Sally”, offer a good sense of how the defensive installations looked like, located on a dominating hill outside the village of Siedliska. The fort had been named in honor of General Daniel Salis-Soglio, the military engineer who had initiated the building of Przemysl's defenses. Construction of the fort had begun in 1882 and ended in 1886. Like other artillery forts built at this times, it was approximately trapezoid in shape, with

a rear entrance and circumferential wall and ditch. Fort I was supposed to be capable of sustained, independent resistance under siege. These held more than 10,000 explosives, shrapnel; and canister shell. Each of the fort's cannon had a quota of 500 shots stockpiled. According to the regulations, 100 for each gun had to be fused and ready for immediate use. For the fort's infantry, 269,000 rifle rounds were kept in storage.

The Habsburg Empire and its army, having ejected and disposed the villagers (like the Ruthenian communities suspected of Russian sympathies and regarded them as security threats) did little to help them. Some found their way to the bigger cities of Galicia, where they were placed on evacuation trains and joined the flood of 600,000 displaced people heading for the interior. Many spent the following years rolling in shoddily built refugee camps, where over the winter epidemics raged and killing up to a third of inmates.

The Fortress Command, like other military and civilian authorities in Galicia, acted preemptively to smash all possible resistance. Lists of potential traitors had been drawn up by district officials in peacetime, and across the province, over 4,000 people were arrested in the first days of war. The Russophile intelligentsia was the primary target. The Greek Catholic Church, to which most Ruthenes adhered, suffered particularly grievously. Father Mykhailo Zubrytsky, the Greek Catholic priest of the village of Berehy Dolne, was one of the many innocents caught up in these arrest.

As the Russian army approached Przemysl, the fortress garrison swelled to 131,000 men and 21,000 horses. This was strength far beyond anything planned in peacetime, when 85,000 men and just 3,700 horses had been thought an adequate defense. The vastly inflated numbers marked how critical the Fortress had suddenly become. General Franz Conrad desperately needed Przemysl to stall the enemy and win time for recovery and reorganization. The numbers also reflected the deficiencies of prewar preparation.

General Aleksei Alekseevich Brusilov, the commander of the Russian army group around Przemysl, was a real warrior. He was a risk taker, a Calvary man with "a heart for every adventure", yet also savvy, with broad experience and a reputation as a thorough trainer of men. He made it his mission to conquer the Fortress. The capture of Przemysl, Brusilov realized, would open the way for an invasion of Central Europe. At the very least, taking it would secure Russian gains in eastern Galicia. Yet much more could be expected. Stavka, the Russian high command, was at this time transferring forces north for a huge war winning offensive from the Vistula River to bring about "a deep penetration into Germany".

Food shortages, inequality, and gross corruption shattered and solidarity within the Fortress. The command could not contemplate reducing officer rations, and would not intervene effectively to halt abuses. Instead, it extended the Fortress' lifespan by requisitioning ever more ruthlessly from the villages around Przemysl. The troops manning the defensive periphery were reduced to robbery

or begging from house to house. They spent long, black nights excavating frozen potatoes and turnips from the icy waste of no-man's-land. Kusmanek forbade the dangerous practice, but by this point, as one man explained, "that was in the order, but no one cared about orders or about frost or about enemy bullets. The only thing that mattered was to eat". Even as the Fortress starved, its continued resistance behind Russian lines exerted a powerful and deeply malign influence on Habsburg military strategy. Back in November when the field army had retreated from the San, General Conrad has made the comprehensible but cowardly decision to hold Przemyśl.

The news of Przemyśl's capitulation quickly spread. Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, the Russian army's Supreme Commander, was euphoric when, that same morning of March 22, 1915, a report from the besieging force arrived at Stavka. He ran to the Tsar's railway carriage to share the great tidings. All over occupied Galicia, along the front and in Russian newspapers, triumphal notices were immediately posted. In Austria-Hungary, the first announcements of the disaster were published early that evening. By the following morning, March 23, Przemyśl was on every front page.

Most of the Przemyśl prisoners were incarcerated deep in Asian Russia, in the region of Turkestan (in today's Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan). The rail journey lasted two to four weeks. Cattle wagons, those functional items of the nineteenth-century industrial revolution that, in the dehumanization twentieth, became icons of ethnic cleansing and genocide, were provided for transport. Cold, dark, overcrowded, and stinking, they were breeding grounds for disease-carrying parasites. The wagons rolled slowly. Food was distributed only irregularly and could be barely edible. When the weak men eventually disembarked, they found themselves in a strange climate. Turkestan was a place extremes. In the winter it could feel like the arctic. In summer, temperatures soared up to 45 degree Celsius. Its unsanitary camps were overseen by brutal guards, and epidemics raged through them in 1915. Everybody contracted malaria. Dysentery, cholera, and typhus killed thousands.

Thesis of the book

Watson described Europe as home of reason and humanity, yet crisis ensued and war broke. Crises in the half-civilized Balkans were nothing new. The newspapers had soon turned to other subjects. Besides, it was summer the city's intelligentsia were on holiday, enjoying the warm weather. Already before August 6, the day the Habsburg Empire declared hostilities against Russia, schools had been commanded for use as military hospitals, Przemyśl's lively local Press, full of conflicting opinion in peacetime, closed down. Instead, information came through monolithic, uncontradictable official proclamations.

Victory turned out really just euphemism for heavy losses. The author affirmed that those able to speak, after trains of suffering humanity had arrived, told stories of fighting utterly at odds with official pronouncements. The Habsburg artillery had shot up its own infantry. Supposedly camouflage “pike gray” uniforms were too bright and made the troops easy targets.

Watson recorded six thousand people, most of them Ruthenes and Jews, were ordered to depart Przemysl, along with anybody who did not possess three months of food. The military had counted on around 20,000 people leaving. And by the time the field army started to retreat in force through the Fortress on September 13 and 14, the military could report that 18,000 civilians remained in Przemysl. In actuality, considerably more had stayed and were simply not counted in the general confusion.

Watson opined the man who bore the most blame for the disaster was the Habsburg army’s general staff Chief, Franz Conrad Von Hotzendorf. Describing Conrad as that most dangerous of men, a romantic who believes himself a realist. He embraced a social Darwinist conviction in the inevitability of struggle. The author explained Conrad had watched with horror as in the last decades of peace. The empire’s international standing fell and its military power ossified while prospective enemies grew ever stronger. Only immediate, violent, decisive action could, Conrad believed reverse the decline, force internal reforms and guarantee the empire’s survival as a Great Power. Furthermore, Conrad also had more personal reasons for favoring a war policy: for the best part of a decade, he had become disastrously obsessed with a married woman little more than half his age, the beautiful Gina Von Reininghaus even as the European emergency spiraled out of control, he spent a startling amount of his time writing her long and effusive letters. Conrad came to believe that by romantically returning as a war hero he might have a slim chance of overcoming Austria’s inflexible divorce law and Gina’s own hesitancy to marry the object of his desire. Conrad himself, and for decades afterward his apologists, intoned that blame for the empire’s defeat lay within its politicians, who had refused in peacetime to grant the army sufficient funding or manpower the author agreed there was truth in this argument.

The author recorded, no fewer than fourteen villages, in the Ruthenian communities, were blown up or burned down. Another fourteen were punished with demolition in the second half of September, when reports arrived that their inhabitants, likely under some duress, had assisted Russian troops with transportation services.

Watson reviewed the significance of Russian victory after Przemysl’s capitulation by detailing the huge number of prisoners: 9 Habsburg generals, 2,500

officers, and 117,000 other ranks had all fallen into Russia hands. The author reiterated the Russians themselves were in no doubt the significance of the moment. A brigadier of the Tsarist 81st Reserve Division who arrived at the Fortress Command surrounded by Cossacks euphorically captured the day's joy and gravitas. "Przemysl belongs to us now forever", he crowed. Watson judged, yet as the following months, years, and decades would bloodily show, such triumphalism was distinctly premature.

Analysis/ evaluation of the book

To further describe how no one had imagined that the death of one man could nearly end half a century of peace, one resident recalled how the announcement of general mobilization on July 31 had struck them like a thunderclap. Also, Dr. Jan Stock, a physicist at Lwow University drafted into the ranks and stationed at Przemysl, marveled at the preparations: "Every living human is not only taken over by the war, but takes an active part in it. I wouldn't have believed, had I not watched with my own eyes, that everything which calls itself life could so subordinate itself to one will and to war. Telegraph and telephone communications, railway, maritime and road traffic all of it given over for use in war".

Watson (2020) wrote, "The front in the east was moving closer. Treason was everywhere. The soldiers particularly damned the Ukrainian-speaking population for its treachery. Flags, mirrors, and smoke, they bitterly recounted, had all been used to signal their positions to the enemy. In one village, it was believed, civilians had brazenly held a procession praying for Habsburg victory past artillery emplacements, to draw attention to them so that the Russians would know where to aim their shells".

As Watson analyzed, what the remaining civilians in Przemysl saw was a broken army. For some, it was the scale of the retreat that made the most impression, the seemingly "endless chain" of wagons rattling over the city's main squares, the rags they wore, and the "sadness on all faces". Disturbing through these sights were, even more anxiety provoking was the thought of what lay behind, crawling toward Przemysl. Residents had, already caught some hints. Days earlier, a train carrying Russian prisoners had rolled slowly through the city station. One prisoner, a Pole in the Tsar's services, had stuck his head through the bars of his wagon and shrieked out to onlookers: "Oh! You poor, poor people. A great power is coming toward you. They will murder you".

Watson (2020) "In 1912, the empire's military budget amounted to little more than a third of what Russia was spending, and around two-thirds of the

funds France allocated to its army. The annual draft remained stuck at a level set in 1889. Whereas Germany trained 0.49% of its citizens every year, and Russia, which thanks to its colossal population of 170million souls, had no need to be thorough, conscripted 0.35%, the Habsburg Empire, with 51million inhabitants, annually took just 0.27% into the military service. On mobilization in 1914, against 3,400,000 Russian troops and 250,000 Serbs, the Habsburg army could field only 1,687,000 men”.

Watson wrote, “By contrast, as Romer frankly confessed, cooperation between the Habsburg artillery and infantry was weak. The gunners chose their own targets, often with only vague knowledge of enemy positions. Much ammunition was wasted. The obvious superiority of the Russian gunners, who seemed everywhere capable of putting down accurate and heavy bombardments was debilitating”.

As analyzed, Conrad, like most commanders of the day, was a firm advocate of the offensive, but he stood out for his uncompromising belief in the ability of sheer willpower to conquer the fire-swept battlefield. In Conrad’s conception, artillery was not needed to clear a way forward. His 1911 regulations asserted that physically tough, determined, and aggressive infantry could along “decide the battle”. Within the professional officer corps, his subordinates thoroughly imbibed this mentality... The same mentality fostered a disdain for lifesaving digging. Regiments were quickly obliterated. On the first day of battle, August 26, units of the III “Iron” Corps, operating farther south from where Romer was fighting, lost between a quarter and a third of their men. Infantry Regiment 47, a mainly Austrian German unit, had 48 officers and 1,287 other ranks killed, wounded, or missing that day. Infantry Regiment 87, filled mostly with Slovenes, suffered 350 killed and 1,050 wounded in clumsy and fruitless attacks.

Watson (2020) “The official narrative circulated by the Habsburg army was that the Fortress had fallen with honor: «The defense of Przemysl will forever remain an illustrious and glorious chapter in the history of our army». The garrison had been heroic to the end, even daring to launch a final attack in order to break the enemy’s encirclement. Its prolonged resistance «to the outer limit of human endurance» had inflicted immense losses on the Russians. Starvation, not storm, had finally forced the end. The heroes remained undefeated. Everything of military value «forts, bridges, weapons, ammunition, and war material of all kinds», had been destroyed. The enemy had captured only ruins”.

Conclusion

Sometimes, things we assume to be certain, that we take as solid, stable, and lasting, can collapse with shocking suddenness. In the summer of 1914, war broke out all over Europe. In the continent’s towns and villages, people lived as

if Armageddon would never come. They worked, built careers and businesses, fell in love, and raised children. Yet in 1914, all would be swept up in the maelstrom. The old civilization would be ripped apart, dreams destroyed and lives cut short. The book was well chronicled with pictures of people, events and records.

Recommendation

The book is recommended to historians to learn that starvation, not storm, had forced the end of the Przemysl Fortress, which Habsburg Empire was bound to.