



2012-002

Graydon A. Tunstall, *Blood on the Snow: The Carpathian Winter War of 1915*. Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2010. Pp. ix, 258. ISBN 978-0-7006-1702-3.

Review by Lee W. Eysturlið, Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy (leysturli@imsa.edu).

By early 1915, the Habsburg Monarchy faced a self-inflicted strategic crisis of the first magnitude. Under the command of the ever fallible Conrad von Hötzendorf, successive Austrian offensives against the Serbs and the Russians in 1914 had been outright failures. In both cases, Conrad had attempted to shift between fronts with insufficient resources and succeeded only in grinding the life out of the fragile, undermanned, and underequipped Habsburg Army. As a result, the Russians were able to lay siege to the critical Austrian fortification of Przemyśl, which guarded the great Hungarian Plain against Russian invasion. In reaction, Conrad gathered forces to relieve Przemyśl with an offensive through the Carpathian Mountains immediately east of the fortress. The campaign ultimately grew into three separate, unsuccessful offensives, culminating with the fall of the fortress.

Even against the brutal backdrop of the First World War, the Austrian offensives of 1915 set a standard for horrific slaughter. The Habsburg Army worked mightily in inhuman conditions. The following passage describes the first of the great “offensives”:

Separated attack groups often lost their bearing in the blinding snowstorms. The soldiers suffered from frost-bite; their weapons jammed from the bitter cold. Nevertheless, Conrad’s soldiers continued their attacks. Troops were expected to undertake exhausting marches through meter-deep snow to reach the battlefield, only to find no shelter awaiting them. In a cruel twist of fate, frigid conditions interspersed with sudden periods of rising temperatures and thaw. Steady rain and melting snow turned the valley terrain into a pit of mud as troops, artillery, ammunition, animals, and supply wagons sank into the mire. Rising floodwaters swept away bridges, and soldiers were forced to lie in their waterlogged positions. (69)

This comprehensive and meticulously researched new work on the Carpathian War by Graydon Tunstall (Univ. of South Florida) represents the very first book-length treatment of the campaign in English and the most current work on the subject in any language. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the history of the Habsburg Monarchy, the First World War, modern warfare in general, or Eastern Europe.

Blood on the Snow is broken into an introduction, four chapters, and a brief conclusion. The notes and bibliography together take up thirty-six of the book’s 258 pages. The introduction covers events prior to the actual Carpathian offensives, the nature of those offensives, the immense losses incurred, and the unbelievable conditions the men endured. Tunstall also discusses the Russian commander Nikolai Y. Ivanov’s plans for an offensive in the Carpathians and his massing of forces for that purpose.

Chapter 1 deals with the planning for all three offensives, especially the logistical preparations, or lack thereof. Artillery was in short supply, both tubes and rounds, as well as guns built specifically for mountain warfare. Most engagements were fought with little or no artillery, an oddity during the First World War. Air power, too, was virtually nonexistent. In short: “Like their Habsburg counterparts, Russian troops deployed in the Carpathian Mountains could also be described as a trained militia force; they had encountered equally difficult weather and terrain conditions. This meant that by early 1915, two peasant armies deployed in the Carpathian war theater sought in vain to defeat the other” (37).

The second chapter treats the first of the three Austrian offensives. As the attacks opened in January 1915, the weather was already deplorable. Both supplies and, of course, artillery were lacking. As Tunstall observes, the Austrian rail system was wholly inadequate to move troops on the scale that the offensive required. The men often had to disembark at some distance from their destination, then move on foot with animals and supplies for many miles over poor roads or through deep snow. The Habsburg troops seemingly spent much of their time in any advance shoveling snow just to get near the Russians. This chapter, in-

deed the whole book, details the lack of operational coordination between army and corps commanders at the front, which led to sporadic, desultory attacks that produced little, other than casualties.

The third and fourth chapters deal with the Second (late February to mid-March) and Third (March onward) Carpathian offensives. Here Tunstall uses officers' reports to illustrate the army's ongoing problems:

The Habsburg army's inability to rapidly maneuver artillery once it was placed into firing position further stymied efforts to support the infantry, and increased the danger of batteries being overrun if retreat suddenly became necessary. Moreover, Habsburg artillery often proved unreliable and in need of constant repair. Many guns that presumably had been repaired were returned to service still unworkable. Habsburg Supreme Command continued to receive disconcerting reports regarding the poor combat performance of replacement March Brigade units. In critical battle moments, the fighting and resistance power of these ill-prepared troops often melted away. (116)

Given such conditions and poor prospects of success, the motivation and morale of the non-German troops, especially the Czechs, came into question. Desertions reduced many units' combat strength. Although the surrender of Fortress Przemyśl on 22 March 1915 removed any real need for Conrad to press for further offensives in the impossible conditions, they continued nonetheless.

The Carpathian offensives ended just after Easter 1915, with both sides exhausted. The Austrian effort had failed. The Russians now held Fortress Przemyśl and the mountainous terrain of the northern Carpathians. The Habsburg army in turn had been reduced to an ill-equipped, demoralized, and depleted "militia" force. But for the major German Gorlice-Tarnow offensive that began just after Conrad's campaigns foundered, the Austrian situation would have been irretrievable.

While his clear focus is on a series of battles fought in early 1915, Tunstall has provided much more than a purely operational history. His breathtakingly thorough familiarity with Austrian and Hungarian archives, general army and war archives, personal papers, and dozens of field and staff officers' diaries and reports allows him to vividly convey the horrors and frustrations men experienced during the offensives.

Two final negative criticisms, neither fatal. First, the book has too few maps. While there are several relatively clear operational level maps, it is very difficult to grasp the context of the greater theater of war in the East. Second, there is no discussion of political and other motives that drove Conrad to mount his offensives. Why did he do it? Perhaps this is a topic for another book. But, as it is, *Blood on the Snow* is a seminal work by the English-speaking author best qualified to write about the campaign.