



Fall of the Double Eagle: The Battle for Galicia and the Demise of Austria-Hungary by John R. Schindler.

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In August 1914, the Fifty-Ninth Regiment of the Austro-Hungarian army sent 123 officers and some five thousand men to war in the defense of the Empire. Roughly six weeks later, the shattered remnants of this Salzburg-based unit fell back across the San River in Austrian Galicia, one of many units reeling westward in the face of an overwhelming Russian onslaught that had already taken the provincial capital of Lemberg and threatened to press still further into Habsburg domains. Despite having been replenished by a thousand men once the fighting began, only sixty-two officers and a little over two thousand men remained to stagger across the river. The regiment had lost two-thirds of its strength in just three weeks of fighting (254).

The fate of the Fifty-Ninth highlights in miniature the devastating consequences of the Habsburg Army's first battles against the Russians, in August and September 1914 in Galicia. Even veteran historians of the war, accustomed to its appalling carnage, marvel at the harrowing scale and ferocity of this clash of empires: in a matter of weeks, the Austro-Hungarian armies lost close to half a million men, sealing the Empire's fate before its troops had even completed their retreat.

Historian John Schindler¹ thinks this massive and consequential engagement is too little known, even among serious students of the Great War. With *Fall of the Double Eagle*, he aims to place the battle for Galicia on the roster of key opening engagements, alongside the Marne and Tannenberg. He has produced a superbly written, carefully researched, and gripping analysis of how and why the Austrian army was effectively destroyed at the very outset of the war.

Schindler begins with several chapters introducing Habsburg history; this will be familiar ground for specialists, but those unfamiliar with the particulars of the Dual Monarchy will appreciate this setting of the historical context. In particular, the invaluable overview of the Austro-Hungarian army, with its complex structure and multiethnic composition, is clear and accessible but not simplistic; no mean feat, given the intricacies of Habsburg politics and society on the eve of the Great War.

After a chapter on the Serbian debacle, Schindler devotes most of the rest of the book to the Austro-Russian clash in Galicia, revealing himself to be a most gifted writer of operational history. As he narrates the unfolding disaster, he expertly traces the movements of armies across the Galician fields, though readers must have their own maps at hand, since the book provides none. At the same time, he adopts a ground-level view of the campaign through a skillful blending of sources, including official military records, memoirs, and letters written in the polyglot Empire's many languages. These documents vividly convey the dramatic tension and visceral, gut-wrenching horror of the fighting. Readers will feel a helpless dread as they watch the Austrian commander, Field Marshal Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, split his forces and send the First and Fourth Armies northward from Galicia to mount a vigorous attack against the Russians on their own soil. Meanwhile, the Third Army was ordered to march east, directly into the Russians' main striking force. Conrad's strategy was vitiated by "a funda-

1. Formerly of the National Security Agency and the US Naval War College.

mental uncertainty about what ... [it was] meant to achieve” (152).² For reasons known only to him, Conrad believed the Second Army’s twelve divisions could rapidly defeat the Serbs and then be moved north to join the Third before combat began in earnest. The collision of the Russians’ main offensive thrust with the unprepared, outnumbered, and outgunned troops of Conrad’s Third Army wreaked irreparable devastation on the Austro-Hungarian troops.

Schindler’s clear-eyed account of this fluid and shifting strategic situation is no bloodless tale of the movement of lines and arrows and regimental numbers. He evokes the dark heart of these battles, with colorfully uniformed cavalry officers riding on their ceremonial saddles into withering Russian artillery fire, and exhausted reservists bunching up in fear as they are shelled and machine gunned into so many piles of obscenely mauled corpses.

Schindler frequently mentions that the commanders on the ground could not possibly have shared his omniscient view. In the fog and friction of war, they rushed to their doom, often with little idea where the enemy was or how many of them they might encounter. The author notes that friendly fire took a toll, as nervous and exhausted Habsburg troops, terrified of Cossacks, shot at their own horse artillery units. He observes, too, that, for various reasons, Habsburg troop trains moved along at a leisurely “eighteen kilometers an hour, slower than a bicycle and barely half the German rate” (152). More than a curiously morbid detail, this typifies the many deficiencies, big and small, that cost the Austro-Hungarian army so dearly on the battlefields of 1914.

Throughout the book, Schindler revisits explanations advanced over the decades for the poor performance of the Habsburg military, offering his own compelling analysis along the way. He takes a nuanced position on the key theme of nationalism, which many historians³ have seen as that multinational institution’s fatal weakness. Admitting that nationalism was indeed a problem in Franz Joseph’s army, he stresses that regimental tradition combined with dynastic loyalty nonetheless made the army one of Austria-Hungary’s most stable and durable institutions. On the more pointed and controversial question of the loyalty of the Czech troops—accused of treason by both wartime Austrian commanders and many postwar analysts up to the present—Schindler argues that many of their units performed bravely at the outset of the war; but the constant suspicion they endured and their incessant scapegoating in the wake of military setbacks badly damaged their morale. In one area of military affairs, however, nationalism proved to be a fatal problem. Like Geoffrey Wawro, Schindler plausibly singles out Hungarian politicians as a major obstacle to military modernization. Austrian attempts to raise more money for the army were frequently thwarted by Hungarian politicians demanding more concessions to Hungarian self-rule in exchange for their support.

Thus, due in part to obstructionist elites, the Habsburg army entered the twentieth century woefully unready for modern war. But even if it had been fully modernized, it could not have accomplished much in the hands of its incompetent commander. Chief of the General Staff Conrad, Schindler writes, was a disastrous supreme commander, completely oblivious to what he could reasonably expect his army to do. Schindler is restrained and balanced in his portrayal of this strange man, obsessing over his relationship with his married lover while his army was cut to pieces. He points out, for example, that Conrad, keen to incorporate aviation units into the army, was no reactionary. He also tried to impose more sensible uniforms on the cavalry and his conviction that a vigorous offense could overcome any amount of defensive firepower was conventional wisdom at the time, based

2. Quoting Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front, 1914–1917* (NY: Scribners, 1975) 80.

3. Including, recently, Geoffrey Wawro, *A Mad Catastrophe: The Outbreak of World War I and the Collapse of the Habsburg Empire* (NY: Basic Books, 2014).

on the bad habit of learning “lessons” from past wars. Nor was Conrad responsible for the major weaknesses of the Habsburg military—lack of artillery and ill-trained troops.

On the other hand, Schindler shows that Conrad dealt with his haunting fear of a two-front war by simply not planning for one. Then, confronted by just such a war in 1914, he made a series of catastrophic decisions. For example, he ordered Second Army’s twelve divisions into Serbia, even though the Russians were bearing down on him. He then transferred them from that debacle to another in Galicia. Schindler aptly quotes Churchill’s inimitable summary of the consequences of this decision: the Second Army “left [Austrian commander in the Balkans, Gen. Oscar] Potiorek before it could win him a victory; it returned to Conrad in time to participate in his defeat” (106). Conrad clearly lacked imagination, flexibility, a realistic sense of the nature of both warfare and the capabilities of his own army, and, most fatally, intellectual and moral courage as a commander. Faced with difficult or unpleasant realities, he tended to ignore them.

Fall of the Double Eagle can be read and appreciated by interested general readers as well as all students and scholars of the Great War. Part of its appeal, besides the high quality of the writing, is its author’s gift of being sympathetic without lapsing into romanticism and critical without becoming injudicious. While the book complements other recent battle histories of the eastern front,⁴ John Schindler’s contention that the fight for Galicia inflicted a lethal wound on the Dual Monarchy makes an especially valuable contribution to the work of recent Habsburg scholars.⁵ The book’s omission of maps is its one, very serious, shortcoming, especially since it concerns a battle (and region of Europe) likely to be unfamiliar to many of its readers. One hopes a second edition will remedy the problem.

4. E.g., Timothy Dowling, *The Brusilov Offensive* (Bloomington: Indiana U Pr, 2008), and Richard L. DiNardo, *Breakthrough: The Gorlice-Tarnów Campaign* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010).

5. E.g., John Deak, *Forging a Multinational State: State Making in Imperial Austria from the Enlightenment to the First World War* (Stanford: Stanford U Pr, 2015), and Ke-Chin Hsia “Who Provided Care for Wounded and Disabled Soldiers? Conceptualizing State-Civil Society Relationship in WWI Austria,” in Joachim Bürgschwentner et al., eds., *Other Fronts, Other Wars? First World War Studies on the Eve of the Centennial* (Boston: Brill, 2014) 303–26.