



Written in Blood: The Battles for Fortress Przemyśl in WW I by Graydon A. Tunstall.

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Written in Blood highlights some of the most brutal battles of World War I, specifically those fought on the eastern front in 1914–15 in and around the Galician town of Przemyśl for possession of its citadel and defensive lines, including concentric rings of fortifications. Military historian Graydon Tunstall (Univ. of South Florida) is a leading chronicler of Austro-Hungarian operational warfare on the eastern front. In the present monograph, which at times overlaps with a previous book by Tunstall,¹ he concentrates on the defense, conquest, and recapture of Fortress Przemyśl, tapping Austrian and German archival documents, as well as relevant secondary sources in German and English. Unfortunately, the book appeared too late for him to consult an important collection of 228 recently published Russian military documents² that would have clarified the Russian perspective on the events he describes.

The book's introduction sketches the pertinent historical background of the fortress war (4). Tunstall agrees with other historians that Przemyśl was “the Verdun of the east,” but points out that the Austrian fortress was larger than the French one and had even more artillery pieces (12). He also notes that both sieges tied down large enemy forces, Russian and German, respectively. The author endorses the view of historians who have “compared the Carpathian Winter War and the fortress surrender to the apocalyptic battle of Stalingrad in 1943 during World War II” (288). The losses suffered at Przemyśl were “greater than the western front bloodbath at either Verdun or the Somme” (4). In his earlier work, on the Carpathian Winter War, Tunstall points out more specifically that “The Habsburg Army sustained at least 800,000 casualties in its futile efforts to rescue the garrison of 120,000 men.”³ Stalingrad, however, differed from Przemyśl in being the turning point of the Second World War, leading to the ultimate victory of the USSR. Tunstall makes no such claim for the siege of Przemyśl and the Carpathian Winter War vis-à-vis World War I. He does correctly argue that the steep casualty rates in the theater, combined with the eventual capitulation of the fortress garrison, so enfeebled the Austro-Hungarian army that it could no longer perform effectively without German help, a fact demonstrated at the battle of Gorlice-Tarnov in May 1915.

Throughout, Tunstall reinforces his thesis with detailed evidence. He argues that “the Galician fortress was inadequately prepared for a major war” (16, 24), and that the Austro-Hungarian army, its original occupant, was unprepared for the Russian siege that began in mid-September 1914 (18, 24, 87). Yet the siege failed because of inadequate planning (80) and lack of enough modern heavy artillery pieces (26, 32). Of the 483 pieces only about thirty were “heavy guns capable of destroying the bulwark's perimeter walls” (93). The Russian supreme command thought it wiser to deploy most of its artillery on the German front.

1. *Blood on the Snow: The Carpathian Winter War of 1915* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2010), reviewed by Lee Eysturliid at *MiWSR* 2012-002.

2. Federalnoe arkhivnoe agenstvo, *Iz istorii Karpatskoi operatsii 1915 g. Sbornik dokumentov* [From the History of Carpathian Operations in 1915. Collection of Documents] (Moscow: Nestor-Istoriya, 2016).

3. Note 1 above: 12, 212.

The author maintains the German threat to Russian forces north of the Vistula eased the pressure on the Austro-Hungarian forces and resulted in the liberation of Fortress Przemyśl on 9 October 1914 (77). During a month-long interlude, the fortress became a supply depot for the field armies that had liberated it. Tunstall claims these troops “plundered” (101) the food supplies, which were not fully restocked thereafter: “this would be the initial step toward the downfall of the fortress and its garrison of 120,000 troops on March 22, 1915” (102). When the second, 137-day siege commenced on 5 November 1915, the “magazines and depots [were] only half full” (127) and seven thousand wounded soldiers had not yet been evacuated from the fortress.

Tunstall believes the fortress was defended during the second siege for political, not strategic, reasons (129). His story’s *bête noir*, Chief of the General Staff Gen. Franz Conrad “allowed the fate of the fortress to exert increasing influence on overall Habsburg eastern front strategy... [and] continued to predicate his plans on Fortress Przemyśl to the great disadvantage of Habsburg field army operations” (130, 138).

The Russians, who completed their encirclement of the fortress between 8 and 11 November (142), continued to be short of heavy artillery pieces, but had less need for them, because they “conducted a slow, systematic siege with the goal of starving the garrison into submission, the opposite of the speedy offensive military action they conducted during the first siege” (134). The Austro-Hungarians’ attempt to lift the siege cost them dearly: “hundreds of thousands of lives would be sacrificed on both sides of the battlefield in futile rescue attempts...” (138). Sorties from the fortress with the aim of joining the battlefield forces failed badly: twenty-four thousand of its troops were killed or wounded (336). The last breakthrough attempt (19 March 1915) failed as well. Tunstall attributes this defeat to the crash landing on 13 March behind Russian lines of a plane that had taken off from the fortress grounds. The captured pilot possessed the operational plans for the breakthrough, which allowed the Russians to prepare for the garrison’s last attack (257). The breakthrough fiasco ratcheted up the casualties even further and added to the total losses on the eastern front, which from August to 1 December 1914 numbered one million dead and wounded (161).

The capitulation of the demoralized, starving defenders of the fortress finally came on the order of General Conrad. Russian troops did not enjoy their prize for long. Defeated by German-Austro-Hungarian forces at the battle of Gorlice-Tarnov, they in turn capitulated on 3 June 1915 and withdrew from the Carpathians (318). Tunstall points out that the Russian supreme commander, Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, had “believed that defending Fortress Przemyśl made no military sense, but it had to be held for political reasons” (321).

The author sees both the Austro-Hungarian and later Russian defenders of the fortress as puppets in a tragedy, suffering and dying needlessly for vague political reasons espoused by their respective war lords. The horror of Przemyśl was eloquently depicted by the Hungarian poet, Géza Gyóni, a soldier of the garrison who died in a Siberian POW camp in 1916. His poem “For Just One Night,” heaps scorn on the men responsible for the carnage at Przemyśl.

Send them [the war lords] along for just one bloody night—
Your zealous heroes spoiling for a fight.
For just one bloody night:
Their former boasts within our memories ring
As rendering shells of shrapnel scream and sing,
As mists of strangling poison slowly rise,
And leaden swallows swoop across the skies....

Send them [war profiteers] along for just one bloody night—
The money-sucking leech, the parasite.
For just one bloody night:

When shell-volcanoes' fire the mud upheaves
And flings torn bodies eddying like leaves.
To crumbling earth the crisping corpses thresh,
Mere blacken'd heaps of bones instead of flesh."⁴

Although his text has its flaws, especially needless repetitions,⁵ Graydon Tunstall has written a welcome, finely detailed account of the battles for Fortress Przemyśl and the offensives of the Carpathian Winter War. It will engage and instruct readers with any interest in the larger context of Austria-Hungary's eastern-front campaigns.

4. *The Lost Voices of World War I*, ed. Tim Cross (Iowa City: U Iowa Pr, 1989) 349–50.

5. Also, its index is defective, omitting altogether or listing incompletely the names of major figures like Gen. Hermann Kusmanek and Chief Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich and places like Uzsok Pass.