

The Fortress: The Great Siege of Przemyśl. By Alexander Watson. Allen Lane, 2019. 333 pp.+index.

Last year saw the publication of a book by the British historian Alexander Watson, well known as an author of many academic articles and monographs on World War 1. This time, Watson has decided to write about the Siege of Przemyśl in 1914–1915. This topic has long merited discussion in a major academic publication. Watson has used a wide range of sources, analyzing materials and books in many languages, including German, Polish, Hungarian, Russian, and Ukrainian. Without a doubt, his use of books and documents in this array of languages has allowed him to present the whole context of the history of the fortress during World War I, including the challenges faced by its residents (civilians, its defenders and later liberators), the importance of the site to the army of the Central Powers, the goals and methods of the invaders (the Russian army), and the ways in which both sides used Przemyśl in their war propaganda.

The book is divided into seven chapters. The introduction shows that the town had long been a fortress with military functions and a place where “the East met the West.” Watson presents the background of the construction of the fortifications on that site; he discusses how the economic situation influenced the ultimate decision to build a fortress in Przemyśl. He also tries to situate these considerations in the larger context, taking geopolitics into account. He argues that the pact of three emperors in 1873 posed a question about the necessity of the fortress. Still, at the end of the nineteenth century, Przemyśl as a fortified defense gate became very important again. Watson claims that the fortification of the town proved very expensive, but the stronghold still did not offer solid protection for the empire, because after 1906, all funds were allocated to reinforce the Austrian-Italian border. In the introduction, Watson provides information on how the militarization of Przemyśl was a factor in developing the town. He also reminds the reader of the specific multicultural nature of the community, which was home to many Poles, Ukrainians, and Jews.

Chapter one is entitled “Broken Army.” This title perfectly describes the actual conditions of the Austrian army. After having suffered defeats to the Russian army, units were forced to withdraw westwards, leaving the garrison of the fortress under siege to its own devices. Drawing on Austrian sources, Watson describes the campaign, putting it in its tactical and military context, based on decisions made by the highest-ranking officials.

Chapter two is entitled “The Heroes,” and the article and noun are deliberately put in quotation marks in the actual table of contents, suggesting some measure of irony. The notion of heroism analyzed in Watson’s discussion seems ambiguous at best. Watson presents the backgrounds of the garrisons’ soldiers, showing differences among the members, and he provides a good portrait of the multi-ethnicity and multilingualism of the Habsburg army. The question seems to be the extent to which the soldiers’ behavior could indeed be characterized heroic, especially with regard to their treatment of civilians. Watson gives examples of how civilians were treated, in particular those of Ruthenian origin. He cites numerous examples of people being arrested, interned, and even executed in accordance with verdicts reached by court martials.

Chapter three, “Storm,” describes the actual “storm” that was to hit soon, namely the first siege of the Przemyśl Fortress. Watson begins with the perspective of Russian units, focusing on the tactics of Russian commanders. As an experienced narrator of soldiers’ perceptions of war, Watson also takes the vantage point of the other side, i.e. of the garrison facing the “storm.” He analyzes their wartime experiences, and he does not spare the reader graphic descriptions of what the soldiers faced, physically and mentally, and how they reacted to the unfolding events. He finishes the chapter with a discussion of how the battle shaped a heroic image of the Austrian army. The victory of the fortress garrison played a significant role in the propaganda, and it was widely used to boost the morale of the soldiers.

In chapter four, “Barrier,” Watson shows how the fortress was not only a military barrier to the advancement westwards of the Russian army, but served above all as an impediment to influences, ideas, and systems from the Russian Empire. The confrontation between the civilizations of the East and West was very clear here, as Watson shows through the attitudes of the Russian army soldiers towards the people in occupied Galicia: the Jews, who had often been harmed by czarist Russia, but also the Ruthenians, whose Ukrainian identities the Russians sought to erase entirely through a process of Russification.

In chapter five, entitled “Isolation,” Watson narrates the second siege of the fortress. This time, the title refers to the literal isolation in which Przemyśl found itself, both the garrison and the civilians. As a result, the front line moved westward, Przemyśl became “an island” among Russian occupying forces. Watson describes the equipment and provision in the fortress and the wartime routine of the civilians and the military. He offers an interesting study of the functioning of an isolated fortress, where there were shortages of everything.

Meanwhile, in some respects, Przemyśl was even more bustling than before 1914. Entertainment was provided in the railway station, and prostitution flourished in the fortress.

Chapter six, “Starvation,” starts with a so-called Przemyśl joke about the difference between Troy and Przemyśl, where in the case of the former the soldiers were inside the horse and in the case of the latter, it was the other way round. This seemingly trivial comparison was actually a brutal truth about supplies in Przemyśl during the war. In the fortress, almost everyone was starving. The title thus conveys not only the literal meaning of suffering from lack of food; it is a symbol of the utter exhaustion of the whole crew and civilian residents, which was accompanied by brutal and inhumane scenes of war executions.

Chapter seven, “Armageddon,” describes the last efforts of the physically and mentally broken garrison of the fortress, which had no choice but to surrender. They started to destroy the fortifications from the inside so that no structures would remain that could be used by the enemy. Certain unanswered questions come up in the reader’s mind about how the civilians were expected to react. Were they expected to be happy to see the end of the apocalyptic siege and starvation? Or would they fear the Russian occupation? It would have been interesting to have seen some discussion of these questions on the basis of the available primary sources, especially personal documents from Przemyśl.

Watson’s study of the siege and surrender of the Przemyśl Fortress during World War I ends with an epilogue entitled “Into the Dark,” in which he includes reactions to the fall of Przemyśl in the press and how the fall of the fortress was used in the propaganda on both sides of the conflict. What happened to the garrison and the civilian residents of the besieged Przemyśl? Both went “into the dark.” The soldiers were to be sent into exile in the farthest corners of czar’s Russia, where they would experience humiliation and the fate of prisoners of war. Civilians often faced a darker fate, including repressive measures already tested on the Ukrainians from occupied Eastern Galicia and attempts to Russianize them, while Jewish people were to be driven away. After the successful military operation at Gorlice–Tarnów, another chapter started for the town, and its residents faced subsequent wartime problems until 1918. In the epilogue, Watson skims over the history of the town during the German invasion of 1939, when Przemyśl was hit by another historical cataclysm.

Generally speaking, Alexander Watson’s book is a valuable study of the fate of the Przemyśl Fortress during World War I, offering insights into the roles of different actors in war, including defenders, invaders, and civilians. What seems

to be lacking is a more extensive discussion of the work of medical and pastoral services in Przemyśl. After all, the fortress forces suffered both in flesh and in spirit. However, this observation is by no means intended as a substantial criticism of the author, who has done a very good job. The book will draw attention to this important historical event among English-reading audiences, and it also constitutes an important academic monograph. The biggest problem for non-Polish readers of the volume perhaps will merely be the proper pronunciation of the fortress' name.

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