

THE FORTRESS: THE SIEGE OF PRZEMYŚL AND THE MAKING OF EUROPE'S BLOODLANDS

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I suspect not one in a thousand Americans could locate Galicia, a historically-important area spanning what is now southeastern Poland and western Ukraine, on a map. To be fair, Galicia is today not on most maps, since it's not a country, and never has been. It is, or was, a land of many ethnic groups, ruled by the Austrians from the 1700s until 1918, and before that by the Poles. In the middle of Galicia lies Przemyśl, now a Polish town near the Ukrainian border. During the early days of World War I, Przemyśl was repeatedly the scene of ferocious battles, which are the topic of Alexander Watson's *The Fortress*. The history offered here is vivid and compelling, and it also usefully illuminates today's Russo-Ukraine War.

The Austrians had acquired Galicia as part of their gains from the First Partition of Poland, in 1772, where Russia, Prussia, and Austria each took chunks out of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Galicia wasn't all that desirable; it was poor, largely agricultural, and hard to defend because it had a long eastern frontier with Russia that lacked any natural geographic barrier. In order to prevent the Russians, in case of war, from overrunning the northern Habsburg domains through Galicia, the Austrians finally decided, in the middle of the nineteenth century, to fortify Przemyśl.

The astute reader will ask why in 1772 Galicia had no border with Ukraine, if Przemyśl now borders Ukraine, not Russia. It's because Ukraine is an brand new country, with zero history as an independent nation, which only came into existence in 1991. The Ukrainians are essentially the Kurds of Eastern Europe—a people whose nation never existed except in the minds of a people, or at least in the minds of the intellectual class. But unlike the Kurds, the Ukrainians ultimately succeeded in their nationalist aspirations, a topic to which we will return.

Becoming a fortress did not mean the Habsburgs built a giant castle in the center of Przemyśl. Rather, they ringed the town, at some distance, with earth-and-masonry forts, thirty-five of them, with trenchworks in-between. (A virtue of this book is excellent drawings, especially of

individual forts, which make the narrative much easier to understand.) The town itself housed a large garrison and was used for central storage. But nothing much happened for decades, and most of the forts and their guns became obsolete, though some were modernized in the years leading up to 1914.

Meanwhile, the town continued as a town. Roughly, the people who lived there were fifty percent Polish, twenty-five percent Ruthenian, and twenty-five percent Jewish, the same percentages as in all of eastern Galicia. What is a Ruthene, you ask? Few call them Ruthenes anymore, but the Ruthenes, in the most common use of the term, are what are now called Ukrainians, who like many other groups first came to ethnic consciousness in the nineteenth century. As Watson notes, “‘Ukrainian’ at this time denoted a political stance: a conviction that Ukrainian-speakers were a distinct nation.” (He wrote this book in 2017; he might not say that now, because it implies some might not consider the Ukrainians a distinct nation.)

Most Galician Ruthenes spoke Ukrainian; nearly all were Greek Catholic (one church of what used to be called “Uniates,” churches with Orthodox liturgy and practice but which recognize the authority of the bishop of Rome). Who we think of as Ukrainians today also include a closely-related group, Ruthenes living in the Russian Empire east of Galicia, Ukrainian-speaking “Little Russians,” who similarly came to ethnic consciousness in the nineteenth century, but who are nearly universally Eastern Orthodox. This split, not very obvious to outsiders, continues in the modern Ukrainian nation.

Other than with respect to administration, civilian and military, the Austrians, comfortable with a multi-ethnic empire, did not try to change the ethnic composition or flavor of what had been Polish lands, nor did they interfere much with the Ruthenes. The Austrians, Poles, and Ruthenes got along reasonably well, although Polish national consciousness (not new in this case, rather ancient) was also on the increase. Intermittently Galicia featured political squabbles between Poles and Ruthenes, but little violence (even if a Ruthene did assassinate the Polish governor of Galicia in 1908).

In September of 1914, a few months into the war, the Russians captured Lemberg (the Austrian name for Lvov/Lviv, now in Ukraine), the administrative capital of Galicia, about sixty miles to the east of Przemyśl,

and then quickly occupied all of eastern Galicia. They intended to ultimately formally incorporate the area into Russia; the Russians viewed both the Ruthenes and the Little Russians as Russian, and they actively suppressed Ukrainian nationalism, which they viewed as a threat, or at least as a nuisance. Przemyśl, however, was a harder military nut to crack than Lemberg, and it had to be done to allow further Russian advances, into western Galicia.

Therefore, the Russians invested the fortress. Watson very clearly lays out all the relevant players, the military situation, and the conditions of the civilian inhabitants of the city, drawing on numerous primary sources. He also does an excellent job explaining the internal dynamics of the Austrian army—as was often the case with the Habsburgs, units were polyglot, with the enlisted men rarely speaking German, the “language of command,” and frequent tensions arising among different ethnic groups. Most of the officers were middle-aged Polish and Austrian reservists and most of the enlisted men were peasant Poles or Ruthenes. The elite units were the Hungarians from the near south, across the Carpathians. They were, according to Watson, very brave and very haughty, which pretty much sums up Hungarians in my opinion too. The presence of Hungarians was natural; at this time, the border of Hungary was much closer to Przemyśl). The Hungarians (who occupied a higher status in the Dual Monarchy, the combined thrones of Austria and Hungary, than did Poles or Ruthenes) disliked the Russians, whom they blamed for crushing the 1848 Hungarian Revolution, and by fighting in Galicia sought to keep the Russians out of Hungary.

Against the expectations, or the fears, of the Austrians, the fortress held. Local leadership was good (though Watson is cutting about the foibles of some of the higher-up Habsburg commanders, directing the battle from afar and letting personal reasons cloud their judgment), and the men outperformed. When the Russians first arrived and demanded the fort's surrender, its commander, Hermann Kusmanek, responded “I find it beneath my dignity to grant a substantive answer to your insulting suggestion.” The Russians responded by trying to storm individual forts, to break the defensive line. The town itself was not much directly targeted, but the siege was very hard on the villages located close by the town; most were emptied and destroyed, either by the Austrians or, for the ones further out, by the Russians, and the villagers became refugees

in an area already packed with refugees. And although the forts mostly performed well under bombardment, Watson talks a good deal about what was once well-known, now rediscovered in the Russo-Ukraine War—one of the most terrible experiences for a soldier is to be helpless under an artillery barrage.

Fighting was intermittent, but as always in such situations, fantastic rumors were everywhere, and fear of the “internal enemy,” a related phenomenon, ran rampant. This meant Ruthenians were under suspicion—not for Ukrainian nationalism, but for being sympathetic to the Russians, which some were. In this fevered atmosphere, the Austrians executed hundreds or thousands of Ukrainian-speaking civilians, under drumhead martial law or simply informally. Watson tries to draw a line from these events to the total wars and civilian massacres that characterized the twentieth century, but this is strained. Americans have just forgotten the costs of war, and that in any war where a fifth column may be perceived, real or not, suspicion and cruelty are the norm. Calm rationality is in very short supply in wars, and the worst, as well as the best, elements in man’s nature are always brought out by war.

Fortunately for Przemyśl’s defenders, after a month, in October, a Habsburg army arrived to relieve the fortress, and the Russians withdrew. The fortress had served its purpose, to prevent the Russians precipitously sweeping westward, and the victory was valuable to the Habsburgs for morale purposes, given the various setbacks they suffered elsewhere early in the war. Soon, however, the Russians were back, because as a result of the larger currents of war, the Habsburgs had had to withdraw and regroup. Nonetheless, the Austrians decided not to abandon the fortress, even though it no longer was urgently needed to block the Russians, in part because they feared losing it would reverse the earlier morale boost gained from resisting the Russians successfully. Przemyśl was therefore left with a garrison of 130,000 men, 30,000 civilians, and inadequate supplies of food and winter clothing. The Russians settled in for a long siege, largely dropping the more aggressive storm tactics they had used in September when in more of a hurry.

The siege proceeded as one would expect—slowly starving defenders; intermittent attacks on individual forts, defended fiercely but less fiercely as the defense wore down; unsuccessful Habsburg attempts, in midwinter in the mountains, to relieve the fortress (costing total

casualties of 670,000 men); a doomed attempt to break out; and, ultimately, capitulation in March of 1915—after the Austrians destroyed all the infrastructure in the town, including the crucial bridges, along with as much of the forts as they could.

The Russians promptly began to Russify the town, even though it was now mostly degraded as a fortress. Already by May, however, the Germans, far more efficient than the Austrians, arrived with modern weaponry (such as the massive mobile howitzer “Big Bertha”), and the Russians departed in haste. For the rest of the war, Przemyśl was irrelevant. In 1918, in the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian lands, it went to Poland, a country again after more than a hundred years. In a harbinger of future troubles, Ukrainian nationalists promptly tried to seize the city by violence, a minor happening in the Polish-Ukrainian War of 1918–1919, a forgotten episode, one of innumerable spasms of violence that characterize this volatile area of Eastern Europe, and always have.

But forgotten by whom? By Americans, to be sure. But not by Poles, and not by Ukrainians, and not by Russians. This little war was fought between Poland and two briefly-existing entities, the West Ukrainian National Republic, formed by Galician Ruthenes out of parts of the Habsburg domains, and the Ukrainian People’s Republic, formed by Little Russians from parts of the Tsar’s domains. These two entities were created by Ukrainians who saw their chance to achieve nationhood in the chaos at the end of the war. They only lasted a few months. The West Ukrainians lost and were soon absorbed by Poland. The Ukrainian People’s Republic was defeated by the Bolsheviks and their lands remained part of Russia.

The next few decades featured chaos and blood in all this area of Eastern Europe. Through all this, the Ukrainians, or at least their intellectuals, continued to be keenly interested in an independent Ukraine. During World War II, the Molotov Line, the division between National Socialist Germany and Soviet Russia after their joint partition of Poland, ran right through the middle of Przemyśl. The Ukrainians therefore allied and fought opportunistically, with both and against both sides as they saw to their benefit, while at the same time trying to cleanse lands they hoped to own of Poles and Jews. Thus, they eagerly cooperated with National Socialist murder of millions of Polish Jews (as discussed in Robert Browning’s *Ordinary Men*), and in the latter years of World War II,

they themselves murdered somewhere around 100,000 Poles in the borderlands of Poland, in what is now western Ukraine. This strategy paid off. The Soviet Union kept the part of Poland it had grabbed (I visited Lvov immediately before the end of the Soviet Union, and it is very visibly a Polish city), and retained the areas coveted by the Little Russians. The Soviet province of Ukraine, which is more or less what constitutes the modern independent country of Ukraine, included those areas and also included smaller parts of Hungary, Slovakia, and Rumania. And it included a lot fewer people who were not ethnically Ukrainian, because most of those were dead or had fled (but it included a large number of people who considered themselves Russian, not Ukrainian, part of the cause of the current troubles). It's not pleasant to contemplate, but ethnic cleansing usually works.

My personal axe to grind in this is the part of Hungary that ended up as part of Ukraine. In 1919, Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia was detached from Hungary and handed to the new country of Czechoslovakia. Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, *Kárpátalja* in Hungarian, had been part of Hungary for a thousand years, and it should go back to Hungary, the sooner the better. (Viktor Orbán, though no doubt he would officially deny it, has been less than subtle in communicating this desire, along with the desire for the return of other stolen Hungarian lands, such as Transylvania.) In fact, for a brief time in the late 1930s and during World War II, Hungary did regain *Kárpátalja* (my aunt was born in Huszt, one of the major towns there, where my grandfather worked as a physician for some years), but after Hungary lost again in World War II, the land was handed to the Soviet Union, and in 1991 to the newly-created Ukraine, where it remains, for now.

Of all the lands taken from Hungary a hundred years ago, Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia seems like the most likely to be restored, given that the current Ukrainian state seems unlikely to survive in anything like its current form. Most likely after the Russians defeat the Ukrainians, the Poles will take back western Ukraine (both for historical reasons and as a buffer against the Russians), the Russians much or all of eastern Ukraine, and the brief history of Ukraine will be effectively over.

Still, I have some sympathy with the Ukrainian desire for their own homeland. That the Ukrainians are likely to lose everything for which they worked for two centuries is the fault of America, of course. Or,

rather, it's the fault of the illegitimate Regime which, for now, rules America. The Regime is the sole ultimate cause of the war, the result of a combination of its hubris, lies, and ignorance, and the Regime has repeatedly chosen to prolong the war, at the cost of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian lives (which would be many more, and include civilians, not just soldiers, if the Russians stopped being far more restrained than we were in Afghanistan and Iraq), when it could easily be ended by negotiation and a settlement that recognized who the regional power is, namely Russia. If we had just fulfilled our 1990s promises to Russia and not meddled in an area that does not concern us and in which we have no vital interest, none of this need have happened.

This is obvious to anyone with two brain cells to rub together, but low-quality discourse (meaning that not informed by history, only informed by low-IQ propaganda that contradicts itself from one day to the next) dominates the entire West, on both this topic and every other topic of public importance. For example, the idea that the Russians want to conquer Europe, so we must fight in Ukraine, is among the dumbest things I have ever heard. (And even if it were true, who cares? A Europe under Russian sway would be preferable to what we have now, dying globohomo Europe under American sway, and would not negatively affect the real interests of the American people in the least.) It is certainly annoying that due to the propaganda machine that bathes every moment of our existence, it is hard to get any reliable information about the war. I've said for eighteen months that everything we read in the media about the war is total lies, which has been proven true again and again (though you can get bits and pieces of facts from less-censored Twitter, even if those too have to be viewed with a jaundiced eye). But the broad outlines are obvious—none of the Regime's enormously costly efforts to stop the Russians, militarily or otherwise, have had any notable impact, despite each new escalation being billed as a "game-changer." The Russians are slowly winning, and improving their position both relative to the Ukrainians and to the Regime with massive increases in industrial output and strengthened alliances outside those countries controlled by the Regime. Meanwhile, the Ukrainians are suffering terribly, and disproportionately to the Russians. Only a fool or a liar could say otherwise.

Even worse, the Ukrainians don't have any choice in either fighting or losing the war, because Ukraine is in no way a sovereign nation, as Orbán was pointing out the other day. Any nation totally dependent for its defense, organization, and revenue on another, which must obey the commands of that other, is not sovereign. A nation that is not sovereign can't lose a war in which its men are forced to fight; only its puppeteers can lose that war. Nor will the United States lose the Russo-Ukraine War, because if the Russians win, the losers will only be the Regime that rules us, along with its cadet branches in Europe (and, to be fair, the Poles, who have a legitimate fear of Russia based in history, but as I say are much more likely to end up territorial winners from the war). And, to be sure, Ukrainians who wanted their own country, but lost it by choosing to throw in with globohomo. The American people will be the big winner—not by gaining anything very specific, but by no longer having to have anything to do with a far-away war in which America has not only no vital interest, but no interest at all. (Plus, the side benefit will be that a loss for the Regime, the more spectacular the better, will bring the inevitable day of Regime fracture much closer.)

Why does the Regime want, and want to prolong, the war? A common claim is that it's driven by war materiel contractors, and more broadly by the so-called military-industrial complex, but Malcolm Kyeyune recently ably debunked that claim, at least enough to convince me. Some see a complicated, far-seeing plan by smart people in the Regime to advance the goals of the Regime, which are in short either, or both, making Europe economically dependent on America and ensuring continuing and expanding Left hegemony over the West, goals they perceive Russia, for all its own problems, as hindering. There is something to this. But in keeping with my general theory that the Regime is the Brawndo Tyranny, dumb, incompetent, and extremely fragile, I don't think there are any smart people at all who are running things, and very few smart people in any position of real power. After all, many Regime demands, such as limitless immigration, will end Left hegemony, at least in Europe, soon enough; when you let your ideology lead you into obviously stupid strategic moves, you are the sucker. No, it's all just the flailings of late-stage leftism, for which we all have to pay the price. The Austrians, Poles, Ruthenes, and Hungarians who died at Przemyśl might have sympathized, even though their also-dying

empire was a lot better than ours. History rolls on, and we will see soon enough what it reveals.