

BOOK REVIEW

Fahey John E. *Przemyśl, Poland: A Multiethnic City During and After a Fortress, 1867–1939*

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Adam Maciej Kożuchowski

Institute of History, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Poland
Email: akożuchowski@yahoo.com

John E. Fahey's *Przemyśl* is a study at the crossroads of urban, military, and political history on the peripheries of the declining Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. It narrates the story of a town that was once located in the center of Galicia in its relationship to the largest Habsburg fortress, constructed over three decades, defended for half a year in 1914–15, and demolished within twenty-four hours of the final surrender, which left Emperor Francis Joseph weeping for three days.

Fahey's goals seem a little incoherent, which is alright, if only they are achieved. On the one hand, he seems to believe that garrison towns, which he knows from his personal experience, have peculiarities of their own that his study is to elucidate. However, the book hardly offers any theory, statistics, or analogies of other military towns of the time or region, focusing on the analysis of interactions between soldiers and civilians in *Przemyśl*. On the other hand, the book intends to “illustrate the role of the army within Habsburg society,” which, the author argues, is supposed to help us “understand the Habsburg state,” because in that state the army, as “one of the few truly imperial institutions . . . had an important role in forging relations between society and the imperial government.” A caveat one needs to bear in mind, however, is that *Przemyśl* was not at all a typical Austro-Hungarian garrison town: due to the enormous fortress it was dominated by the military in terms of money, politics, and destiny, as Fahey aptly demonstrates. Thus, it is a study of the role of the army within Habsburg society in its extremity.

The book is a valuable contribution to the field of the imperial and royal army's performance before and in the early stages of the Great War, which was indeed extreme. This field has been studied intensively in the last decades, and I believe it has changed our perception of the “farewell to Austria-Hungary” theme significantly. Or perhaps *should have changed*, for Fahey, like many others, he seems to be nostalgic about the good old Austria as “better than anything that was yet to come” in Central Europe, though what he actually discusses is the empire at its nastiest. The image of the Habsburg army offered by recent studies, including Fahey's, is eventually much darker than the one that had once been so influentially proposed by István Deák. It evolves from indifference and brutality against the civilians in peacetime to paranoid mistrust and cruelty—also against their own men, in wartime—mitigated with irregular classical music performances.

The most fascinating and informative parts of this book are certainly chapters two and three, narrating the pre-1914 history of the construction of the *Przemyśl* fortress alongside the rapid growth of the city based on the influx of men and capital, which made it the third urban center of Galicia. Fahey focuses on a variety of interactions between the garrison and civilians, which he illustrates with a great number of quotations from the local press and some memoirs and letters. These interactions, in his view, were from the beginning marked with national and class tensions: the fragile equilibrium of the Polish, Ukrainian, and Jewish interests soon got destabilized under the impact of thousands of Austrian and Hungarian soldiers and unskilled laborers hired for the construction of the fortress, which was essentially accomplished by the late 1890s. As investments declined, conflicts rose, resulting, inter alia, with an antisemitic pogrom and the increasing popularity of the socialists, whose reputation

in Przemyśl was related to their antimilitary stance. “The effectiveness of the army as a unifying institution should be questioned” is Fahey’s crucial claim.

Fahey acknowledges that the 1914–15 siege of Przemyśl has recently been analyzed in Alexander Watson’s *The Fortress* and Graydon Tunstall’s *Written in Blood*. Apparently, however, Fahey ignores these works in his hasty narrative, occasionally covering precisely the same issues without necessary context or detail. For example, in discussing letters sent from the besieged fortress (via airmail!), he fails to notice that the correspondence was strictly censored; quoting the official reports on the alleged “Russophilia” in 1914–15 Galicia, he suggests that these accusations were exaggerated but does not go into details of this murderous obsession.

It is hard to understand why the narrative continues beyond 1918 and up to the late 1940s because its main protagonist, the imperial and royal garrison, was obviously gone from Przemyśl (and elsewhere), which lost its status of a “military town on steroids.” Surely, the much smaller Polish garrison of the interwar period (ironically, it was still the X Corps) was also composed of men who ate, drank, and fought in local bars, had sex with local women, and were used for policing in cases of social unrest—but this was true for virtually all armies of the time. Fahey’s attempts to present its functioning in the context of the Polish-Ukrainian conflict, the political realities of the Polish Second Republic, and finally the Soviet and Nazi occupations, are unfortunately superficial. The oversimplified image he proposes is best symbolized by his renaming the head of the Polish garrison in Przemyśl Andrzej Galica as “General Galicia” (interestingly, the general seems to be particularly dear to Polish Americans, who have dedicated memorial plaques to him both in Poland and Chicago). The history of the Polish Przemyśl, I believe, deserves a more serious approach, one that might end in the spring of 2022, when the city was once again under siege, this time from Ukrainian war refugees, humanitarian activists, Polish and Western journalists, and some neo-Nazis trying to repel the invasion.