The Soldier’s Gaze of War Through His Photographs
A discussion on the album, *Przemyśl: nach der Wiedereinnahme durch die verbündeten Truppen*
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**Introduction**

How is war perceived? It should not be controversial to state that popular conceptions of war have often been shaped by the arts. Paintings of generals posing heroically on horseback, sabre in hand, or lyrics of great bards and amateur poetasters extolling the glory of a victory and the heroism of soldiers evoke a certain emotion in the viewer or listener. This emotion, oftentimes, is one of admiration. These depictions, however, clearly do not depict many of the realities of war. While the leaders may be glorious and the soldiers be brave, war is naturally dominated by its grimmer aspects. With the advent of photography, especially the advancement of photography to lower-cost, man-portable film cameras, the depiction of war became democratized, and the effect these images had on the audience became more nuanced. In World War I, the reach of photography showed its impact in shaping the popular perceptions of the conflict. The album *Przemyśl: nach der Wiedereinnahme durch die verbündeten Truppen* (in English: *Przemyśl: after the recapture by the allied troops*\(^2\)), compiled by the Austro-Hungarian side after that side’s retaking of the Przemyśl fortresses in present-day Poland, represents an interesting case study of the varying themes and effects which the power of individual documentation gives to the images. Assembled from photographs taken presumably by a number of different photographers, both on the Russian and on the Austro-Hungarian sides, the album provides a far different view of the Great War than the propaganda of the time. Here, the glory of the nation and those associated ideals means painfully little, generals and leaders are reduced to irrelevant at best and punchlines at worst, and battle is depicted to be little more than an exercise in human suffering, devoid of meaning to those fighting it. Through this, the album leaves the viewer with questions regarding the purpose of the war itself.

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\(^2\) All translations from the German are done by Alex Tang and are not a part of an original document.
Przemyśl Fortress: The Fall and the Recapture

The Polish city of Przemyśl is known in German in the past as Premissel, in Ukrainian and Russian as Peremyshl, and in Yiddish as Pshemishl. The variety of names displays its multi-ethnic and multi-cultural history of coexisting Poles, Germans, Jews, and Ukrainians (Ruthenians), among others. It also reflects its strategic location at the crossroads of empires: in the early 20th century, those of the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and to a lesser extent, German Empires. Lying on the San River, a right tributary of the Vistula (also known as Wisła in Polish and Weichsel in German), it sits atop a militarily and economically vital artery which, naturally, therefore lends the city immense value to any empire which controlled it.

After the First Partition of the lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Przemyśl fell under the control of the Austrian crown in Vienna. Due to its location on the borderlands between Austria and its at times hostile neighbour, the Russian Empire, a series of fortifications, collectively known as the Przemyśl Fortresses, were gradually constructed in and around the city. Eventually, by the eve of the First World War, Przemyśl had become a military stronghold, housing a trove of munitions and supplies and garrisoning more than 150,000 troops of the Dual Monarchy which, like the city itself, belonged to more than a dozen nations under the crowns of Vienna and Budapest ([1], 1442).

With the outbreak of World War I, Germany and Austria-Hungary followed the military strategy of attempting to inflict a catastrophic defeat on the Russian Empire before the sprawling and underdeveloped realm had time to fully mobilise its forces. This plan, however, floundered when in 1914, the Russian Army made significant advances along the front so that by the end of the year, it held the Vistula river, cutting it off from use by Austria-Hungary and her ally Germany. Lemberg, the capital of the Austrian province of Galicia (today Lviv, Ukraine), had already been captured, and by November 1914, the city of Przemyśl, still controlled by Austro-Hungarian troops but having fallen behind the Russian lines, was completely surrounded by Russian forces and put under siege ([1], 1435).

The siege would last until late March of 1915, following several unsuccessful and only partially successful break-out and relief attempts by the Austro-Hungarian forces — all of which were, in the end, beaten back by Russian troops. Eventually, however, with supplies and manpower running low and ethnic tensions escalating between the Austrians and Magyars of the metropoles on one side and the subject Slavic nations on the other — whose affinity laid rather with the Slav-ruled Russian Empire — the situation for Przemyśl grew
increasingly dire. Following one final desperate and perhaps suicidal attempt by a group of Austrian and Hungarian troops to break out of the encirclement, the fortresses’ defenders surrendered to the besiegers, thus marking the fall of Przemyśl ([1], pp 1454-1456).

Within but two short months, however, Przemyśl would change hands once again, with the Austro-Hungarian Army regaining control of the city and its fortifications. With support from the German Empire, Austria-Hungary would launch a successful counter-offensive against Russian forces. This led to a massive Russian retreat, the Empire’s troops abandoning their forward positions in the Carpathian passes and falling back all the way to the San river, on which lay Przemyśl ([1], ch. 28-33). Soon, in a reversal of roles, it was now the Austrians and Germans which surrounded the Russians in Przemyśl. Several days later, the Russian defenders in Przemyśl would surrender, and Austria-Hungary once again controlled the strategic city ([1], ch.34).

Austria-Hungary would soon recapture Lemberg and most of the Galician province which it had lost to Russia at the start of the war, beginning a series of disastrous Russian defeats on the Eastern Front, though the Empire would refuse to surrender until its final demise with the 1918 Bolshevik coup. This, however, is beyond our scope of consideration. Instead, we now turn our attention to the image album, *Przemyśl: nach der Wiedereinnahme durch die verbündeten Truppen*, assembled by Austrians after the re-taking of the Przemyśl Fortresses from the Russians in May 1915.

**Grandeur**

It is rather obvious that the Przemyśl album does not dedicate itself to extolling the glories of feats of arms on the battlefield. However, there remain some visible elements of the genre, which are then, contrary to expectation, humorously subverted and their seriousness questioned. Nowhere is the grandiose depiction of the military more readily seen than the photograph “General Brussilow” ([2], 18). Here, depicted sitting at the tea table, is the Russian General Alexei Brusilov, a top-ranking commander in the Imperial Russian Army. This portrait of the general sitting stately in his decorations-adorned uniform, a drink in hand, creates a certain “metapicture” — an image in the viewer’s mind created by elements of an actual image and which guides the viewer’s imagination ([3], 61). The decorated uniform naturally constructs the implication that he is a great general, who had led his troops to a great many victories. The cup of tea and snacks, placed atop what appears to be a map, together with the general’s reading glasses off to the side, creates the image that Brusilov is
relaxed and in control: he is so confident of his abilities and grasp of the battlefield that he is able to pause his study of the situation for tea and a bite of food. In this image, the map denotes confidence, control, and assuredness of victory, and thus by extension the power of the Russian Army and the greatness of its commanders.

Even more interesting is the choice of photograph placed to the left of the portrait of General Brusilov. In the photograph “Unsere Infantrie im Feuer” ([2], 18), or “Our infantry firing”, a group of Austro-Hungarian riflemen are seen lying behind earthen cover, their rifles on their shoulders and ready to fire. More likely than not, this is a staged photograph, as it would be essentially suicidal for a cameraman to take such a photograph in active combat. Most intriguing is the fact that the men’s rifles are pointed directly to the right — at the picture of the supposedly great General Brusilov. This placement is quite humorous — the Austro-Hungarian soldiers are “shooting” at their enemies’ commander, while said commander looks quite calm and unfazed by the “attack”. The assembler of the album is able to create comic out of two serious images, thus undermining both the grandeur of the Russian general by turning his portrait into a figurative shooting-range dummy, as well as alleviating the seriousness of combat by creating out of it an occasion for humour.

Death and Destruction

Death and destruction are, as all are aware, a consequence of any war. These consequences are, unsurprisingly, recurrently depicted throughout the album, with the depiction of destroyed buildings and fallen soldiers and civilians. Of the photographs depicting destroyed buildings, of most interest is the one labelled “Wirkung einer russischen Fliegerbombe” ([2], 20), or “The aftermath of a Russian aerial bomb”. This photograph is clearly staged, with a ring of civilians and men in Austro-Hungarian military and police uniforms standing in front of the ruins of a house and the deceased corpses of several people — presumably the inhabitants of said house. The photograph serves certainly as a record of events, and depicts a mourning that is often absent from documentations of war: the sombre faces of the uniformed men and the dejected expressions of the civilians record the personal effects of the military action. In other terms, it personalizes the impersonal depiction of war seen in the photographs “General Brussilow” and “Unsere Infantrie im Feuer” ([2], 18), and

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3 Wirkung translates literally to effect, but I believe aftermath is a more useful translation given the photograph’s context.
shatters the fantasy of a clean, bloodless war fought by only heroic, professional soldiers which panoramas and propaganda depict by using the power of photography as a vestige of real events to bring the true, undeniable nature of modern total war before the viewer’s eyes, clear to see. The presence of this image in an Austrian album also serves a propagandistic role. To an Austrian viewer, this photograph may serve as evidence of the perceived barbarity of the Russians, fully on display with the slaying of unarmed and defenseless civilians, and fuel greater motivation to fight. At the same time, the image, in a way, also subverts the more common nationalistic angle of propaganda, as it depicts a reason for taking up arms far more nuanced than national pride. “Defending the innocent” is a harsh reality in the era of total war.

More morbid are the photographs depicting the war dead: “Gefallener Russe” ([2], 6) (“Fallen Russian”) and “Russenleiche” ([2], 10) (“Russian corpse”). The deceased soldier in the first photograph is hardly recognisable as anything more than a pile of uniforms, while the corpse in the second photograph is in a grotesque stage of decay. These photographs, like the one depicting the bombed house, immediately dispel any illusion of a war without death and suffering. Their presence in an Austrian album, however, is more noteworthy. Propagandistic depictions of war such as panoramas oftentimes simply never depicted the faces or bodies of the soldiers of the opposing side in any detail ([4], 84), thus dehumanising the enemy and removing any empathetic link to them. These photographs, likely taken by an Austro-Hungarian photographer during or after the battle to retake Przemyśl, explicitly do the opposite. The enemy dead, in these photographs, is a man towards whom many a soldier may at least feel some pity or at least understanding, and possibly even see himself in had he thrown a grenade one second too late or missed a shot. The enemy thus appears far more human to his opponent on the kill-or-be-killed battlefield, for whom the enemy soldier is not too different from him, than the propaganda-fed civilians at home.

These intensely graphic and grotesque images, therefore, breed above all empathy, not only for innocent civilians caught between the fighting, but also for the enemy soldier as a human being. Thus, these images, created by the individual lens, are surprisingly dangerous to the narrative of the war and those challenging it (as implied by the photograph euphemistically titled “Justifizierter” ([2], 6), or “One who was served justice”, which shows a man executed by hanging and whose corpse was then publicly displayed as a warning). They show us traces and footprints of real, tangible events, encounters, and feelings which undermine the propaganda and militarism of the WWI era, and subtly questions why the war is being fought at all, if the enemy soldier is so similar to oneself and his comrades.
Noncombatants

Two very similar photographs, “Lebensmittelzuteilung während der Belagerung” ([2], 11) (“Distribution of supplies during the siege”) and “Ausspeisung während der Belagerung” ([2], 12) (“Feeding (of children) during the siege”). These photographs are similar to “Wirkung einer russischen Fliegerbombe” ([2], 20) in effect: that is, displaying the sufferings of civilians, in this case, mostly women and children. These photographs, however, additionally depict the impacts of the war on children, adding to the effect of the previous photograph by the perception of a molestation of the innocence of children through the (in this case Russian-caused) hardships of the war. In another sense, these images also provide a more nuanced view of the home front than photographs of cheering masses or factory workers. The individual lens here deviates from a glorious narrative of the united home front, banded together to further the war effort, with a depiction of an otherwise unnecessary peril caused by conflict.

A different type of non-combatant is depicted in the image “Gefangene Russen” ([2], 21) (“Captured Russians”). Here, we see a mass of Russian prisoners of war watched by a number of Austro-Hungarian guards. The expressions of the Russian prisoners appear dejected as one may naturally expect from a badly mauled and roundly defeated army, but more notably, their Austrian captors do not appear bombastic or celebratory but rather quite indifferent, almost tired. The soldierly lens captures victory quite differently than the propagandistic one. One should perhaps put this image into context of the costs which had to be paid for the recapture of Przemyśl. Austro-Hungarian casualties in the defence and then later recapture of the fortresses and the surrounding areas were extremely high, in the hundreds of thousands killed, wounded, missing, and captured, with many of the dead having been killed in fruitless attacks against entrenched Russian defenders ([1], ch. 24), while the Russians likewise have suffered tens of thousands of losses in the campaign to capture a city which was again lost only two months later. In light of this, it would seem that victory and the temporary end to fighting was not so much a cause for open celebration as much as one for simple relief. As is the case for the photographs of the Russian war dead, this photograph blurs the difference between the victor and the vanquished, and subverts effectively the propagandistic dehumanisation of the Russian enemy.
What Does the Przemyśl Album Want to Say?

The photographs of the Przemyśl album do not tell any cohesive narrative about a battle, nor attempt to make strong statements for one side or the other. They are essentially documentaries, showing viewers the scenes and images of the battle in and around Przemyśl. Unlike a painting, however, a photograph is not hypothetical, and we know that the events depicted in them must have indeed happened. To quote again Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans’s essay, Towards a Poor Cinema, the photograph, the “trace of an encounter between the camera, its operator, and the photographed persons,” is “an irrefutable form of witnessing.” ([5], 112). The destroyed house was in fact the home of the family killed with its collapse. The fallen soldiers were real people who had died, and the illusions of propaganda as conveyed in other media of art and culture are erased for the soldier on the battlefield — and for the viewers of these photographs.

The documentation of the soldier's experiences creates a vastly different impression of warfare than that told through propaganda. In the atmosphere of militarism and nationalism which had consumed the European great powers in the lead-up to the First World War, this cynical telling of war, devoid of the great legends of heroism and the genius of enlightened commanders, but instead filled with grim depictions of the sufferings of soldiers and civilians and the destruction of common tropes of great generals by turning them into targets — literally — of humour and ridicule.

Just as importantly, the irrelevance of place and classically glorified leaders provides context — or perhaps, a lack thereof, for the terrible scenes depicted in many of the photographs. Where the soldier is, who is leading him, and what he is fighting for are not thoughts which cross his mind when he is more focused on survival, a focus emphasised every day by the sight of dead and wounded civilians and soldiers, both friendly and enemy. Thus, the Przemyśl album is not just a documentary source: it is also a subtle questioning of war itself. If the lines on a map, the glory of the great generals, and the honour of the nation and its leaders are to those actually fighting the battles so irrelevant, the album — and by extension, the soldier — asks, then what indeed is the point of all the killing and maiming of the Great War, what indeed is the point of fighting those who speak another language and wear another set of clothes, who are fundamentally the same as the soldier himself, but who are one’s enemy because he had been told they must be?
References


[2]: Przemyśl: nach der Wiedereinnahme durch die verbündeten Truppen. Przemyśl: [publisher not identified].

