

History's Forgotten Fallen

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Russian artillery on the Eastern front.

Photo courtesy Graydon Tunstall

(PhysOrg.com) -- History researcher conducts ground-breaking investigation into neglected World War I battle.

The ultimate cold case - hundreds of thousands of Czech, German, Hungarian, Polish, Russian and Ukrainian soldiers dead, no eyewitnesses left, and entire nations seemingly anxious to pretend nothing ever happened - intent on covering up what information they had. There were no books on the subject in America, less than a handful of articles and few leads anywhere. But this only presented University of South Florida [history](#) professor Graydon (Jack) Tunstall with the perfect opportunity to exercise his detective skills and engage in his greatest passion, researching military history, to get to the bottom of a conflict that

rivaled the historic battle of Stalingrad in its tragic dimensions. In the process, Tunstall has produced the first full story of history's forgotten fallen soldiers on World War I's eastern front in *Blood in the Snow: The Carpathian Winter War 1915*.

The battle involved two million soldiers from Austria-Hungary, Germany and Russia. Russian troops had their enemy's 130,000 troops trapped in Fortress Przmysl in the Carpathian Mountains. By the time the three offensives waged to win their prize was over, the dead on both sides far outnumbered the people they hoped to save on one hand - or capture on the other.

For historians and history buffs alike this battle represents a major puzzle piece in the picture that explains the fall of the ruling empires of the day. But because the nations involved preferred to forget about it, having lost so many soldiers, few were aware of how important this battle was to the futures of Russia, Germany, Austria and Hungary and world politics from that day forward.

Already, recognition from Tunstall's peers is affirming the value of this research. Praise from authors and experts on World War I Dennis Showalter, Richard L. DiNardo, Holger H. Herwig and Robert M. Citino adorn his book jacket. He is making appearances at schools, organizations and military history gatherings, locally and nationally - most recently at the Western Front Association's Florida & Gulf Coast Chapter, and the U.S. Army Command and Staff School - and down the road at the Florida Antiquarian Book Fair (Mar. 13), the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (Apr. 23), the University of Cincinnati for two lectures (May 13), the Society for Military History Conference at Virginia Military Institute (May 23), the Western Front Association National Conference (September 11) and at the National [World War I Monument](#) this fall.

“This is original research; nobody knew this material,” Tunstall remarks with incredulity. “This battle helped decide the fate of three empires, and is hardly mentioned in any history book, if at all. What we have here opens up a whole new ballgame. And what makes this book unique is that it’s not just about the battle and who fought it, but why, and what strategies were used, what went wrong and what it was like to be a soldier. It encapsulates an entire case study of modern warfare and every aspect of it.”

Tunstall filled in the missing parts of this neglected story with vivid details, in essence provided by those who were there. Though long gone, they left behind enough clues for a gripping account to emerge. And over his ten years of research and putting the pieces together, Tunstall developed a deep connection to the soldiers whose experiences he relived. Over time he was able to describe the bitter cold that doomed them to death. He learned of their being ill-equipped, when it came to clothing, weapons and food - how they froze to death while marching up the treacherous mountains - often before they ever had a chance to fight. When one soldier was wounded, his blood in the snow served as a target for lethal enemy onslaughts. Trying to hide in the snow meant freezing to death.

The story of how he found those missing parts is nearly as compelling. Tunstall had to dig through mountains of documents, including official records, field reports and personal diaries - primarily in national archives - to glean what happened. He was able to get permission to search in some cases and in others, he made friends with nationals who had permission and thereby gained access to what was at times claimed not to exist.

“I was the opposite of the ‘Ugly American’,” Tunstall said, referring to the main character in the 1950s novel. “I found being respectful and nice to people was all it took to gain their cooperation. Without their

assistance the book wouldn't be as comprehensive or have the authentic voice it has."

"One of the luckiest and most surprising finds was in a box of documents about supplies where there was an official report about the losses of soldiers, exactly what I needed, but tucked away in the unlikeliest of places. It was manna from heaven, I couldn't believe it."

At this point, only the grandchildren (themselves quite old) and great grandchildren of those dead soldiers remain. In Vienna, some heard of Tunstall's research and came to see him to ask questions about the forebears they had only heard very little about over the years.



Habsburg troops halting for a rest in a Carpathian Mountain pass.

Photo courtesy Graydon Tunstall

"I was able to tell them that I discovered enough material to write a book that would describe what their ancestors had to face and help them remove some of the mystery shrouding their family histories."

A particularly sad story emerged from one diary. "You have to understand, these were hardened Hungarian officers and in one case,

after six months of this brutal combat, an officer wrote about having to shoot his horse and it still brings tears to my eyes, the way he couldn't shoot and had to look away before he ended the life of this beautiful creature that had stood by him through so much. There were so many stories like this one."

Perhaps one of the saddest outcomes of the Carpathian War is that the survivors went on to fight in the great - and well-known - battle of Golice-Tarnow and many lost their lives there. Even knowing the outcome of this battle, the story of how it played out is exciting in Tunstall's hands.

"Because I was in the military, I know how to explain the important details that matter to those of us who love this stuff, about how the terrain and weather play as important a role as diplomacy, which is also a fascinating part of this story."

A tragic irony of this war is that those who inhabited the fortress the soldiers outside were fighting over in the first place - those who hadn't starved to death during the siege - ended up surrendering to the Russian army. But that part of the story wouldn't fit in *Blood in the Snow*, so Tunstall is at work on a second volume about the fortress.

"What happened behind those walls is a story that bears telling," he said. "It, as with the Carpathian Winter book, fills in a unique military story on this heretofore 'unknown war.' "

The Dickenson College graduate earned his master's and doctoral degrees in European history from Rutgers University. *Blood in the Snow: The Carpathian Winter War 1915* will be released in May.

Provided by University of South Florida

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