



The Splintered Empires: The Eastern Front 1917–21

Prit Buttar

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At the beginning of 1917, the three empires fighting on the Eastern Front were reaching their breaking points, but none was closer than Russia. After the February Revolution, Russia's ability to wage war faltered and her last desperate gamble, the Kerensky Offensive, saw the final collapse of her army. This helped trigger the Bolshevik Revolution and a crippling peace, but the Central Powers had no opportunity to exploit their gains and, a year later, both the German and Austro-Hungarian empires surrendered and disintegrated.

Concluding his acclaimed series on the Eastern Front in World War I, Prit Buttar comprehensively details not only these climactic events, but also the 'successor wars' that raged long after the armistice of 1918. New states rose from the ashes of empire and war raged as German forces sought to keep them under the aegis of the Fatherland. These unresolved tensions between the former Great Powers and the new states would ultimately lead to the rise of Hitler and a new, terrible world war only two decades later.

The Splintered Empires: The Eastern Front 1917–21 Details

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Bill V says

This book is a fitting end to the author's tetralogy on the eastern front during World War I. Once again, quite a few of his conversions from miles to kilometers are incorrect but they seem to be fewer than in the past and the conversion errors were smaller. Several maps were provided although there are a few differences between the way the text spells names and the way the maps do. There were a few minor and inconsequential errors in the text as well.

I was surprised the book went into details about several of the events that occurred after the war ended such as the various conflicts in Latvia, Estonia, Poland, aspects of the Russian Civil War, etc.

I did learn a lot from the book, especially details behind multiple military campaigns. I would have liked more coverage about the combat in the Balkans. The situation with Romania is covered but not Bulgaria nor the French and British efforts in the region.

Inevitably, but understandably, a great deal of the book deals with the political aspects of the conflict. Overall, I found the title to be interesting reading.

Heinz Reinhardt says

This fourth volume brings to a close Prit Buttar's magisterial quadrilogy on the Eastern Front during the Great War. Like the preceding volumes, this one begins where the prior volume left off.

Despite the glowing success against the Hapsburg K.u.K., the Russian Army had utterly shot its bolt during the Brusilov Offensive, and had seen but slight success against German formations. As was all too often the case, jealousy against Brusilov conspired to rob him of his grand success as commanders who sneered at his revolutionary methods resolved to win victories in a more traditional manner. This only resulted in yet more beatings at the hands of the Germans.

By the beginning of 1917, everywhere on the Eastern Front, despite a considerable advance in the south thanks to Brusilov, the Russian forces were on the verge of collapse. Already revolutionary fervor was gripping the Army, and the Germans actually let them largely alone, waiting for the cancer of revolution to spread before striking a weakened foe.

Buttar goes into detail the beginnings and course of the Russian Revolution, the murder of Rasputin and the Czar and his family, and the bloody, chaotic street fighting in Petrograd. He also charts the rise to power of the Bolsheviks and of Lenin, and the blood fueled savagery that they would unleash upon Russia and later a large portion of the globe.

While this volume is lighter on military details, the focus being the political turmoil in the East, the author covers expertly all of the occurrences between the start of 1917, through to the end of the Soviet-Polish War of 1920.

He discusses the collapse of the Hohenzollern dynasty in Germany and that of the Hapsburgs, as well as the Communist intentions to reclaim the former frontiers of the Russian Empire by force of arms.

What was most fascinating was the narration of the often entirely ignored wars for independence in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, the Finnish Civil War, and the actions of the German Freikorps in the Baltic states both against the Communists, as well as against the states seeking independence from their more powerful neighbors. He even makes mention of what was essentially a brief civil war in Germany between nationalists and Communists that was brutally suppressed by German veterans of the Great War. In fact, he details how the Germans even as early as 1919 were not abiding by the clauses of Versailles, and the western Allies,

unwilling to go to war and also fearful of Communism spreading, looked the other way as Germany waged a technically illegal war in the Baltic to stamp out Communism.

This was made easier by the heinous practices of the Red Army and the Communist revolutionaries who were little more than barbaric, murderous savages who slaughtered entire communities and had an especial hatred for the Church. While the actions of those who drove them away was little better, with a White Terror often following a Red Terror, the author made sure to dispell some of the more laughable myths of modern thought regarding the methods of Real Communism.

Easily, however, the most remarkable tale in the book is the final chapter detailing the Polish War for Independence and the success of the infant Polish Army in winning a stunning success against the Red Army at the Battle of Warsaw.

One cannot help but wonder, however, if had Germany not overextended itself following the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, if possibly the beast of Communism might not have been easier contained were the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires not in a state of rigor mortis. Then again, the stresses of the war itself fatally weakened all three empires (Russia included), and this was not helped by Woodrow Wilson's myopic and naive notion of self determination as the source of peace and stability in Europe.

In truth, Wilson's Fourteen Points largely led to the chaos in Eastern Europe post 1918, and this chaos helped with the spawning of a new beast, equally as terrible as that of the international socialism of the Soviet state: the National Socialists of Germany. In fact, as the author points out, WW1 was not fully resolved until the end of WW2.

A magnificent series, easily the best ever written on the Eastern Front in WW1. Having finished this it is my fervent hope that Prit Buttar will, at some point, turn his eye to the Russian Civil War, to offer up an equally excellent military and political history of that conflict.

Highly recommended.

Alan says

Great finish to a great series.

Interested in the eastern front during WWI? This is the final book in a series detailing the war on the eastern front. The book is highly researched and well written.

Jim says

This book is obviously a labor of love, and well documented.

Splintered Empires shows how the three "eastern" empires shared a similar history as World War One came to an end. Buttar shows the interlocking events of the Eastern Front and how the region reacted to the collapse of the three regional powers. He also shows the "war beyond the war" and how their collapse contributed to the rise of new local powers (i.e. the Baltic states and Finland).

Much attention is paid to Russia since its collapse was the most dramatic and far reaching. Buttar goes into great depth into this, and also to the fallout in the region after Imperial Germany fell apart. This provides insight into the subsequent idea of Eastern Europe as a place of "race and space" used by the Nazis for their proposed expansion.

Joe Collins says

This is the final book of a four part series covering the Great War in the East. Unlike the other three, this one covers multiple years where the others only covered one year. Because of this, I feel this book is the weakest of the four and in many ways not as informative as the others. Too much happened during this period of time. I think the author would have been better off doing one more book in the series.
