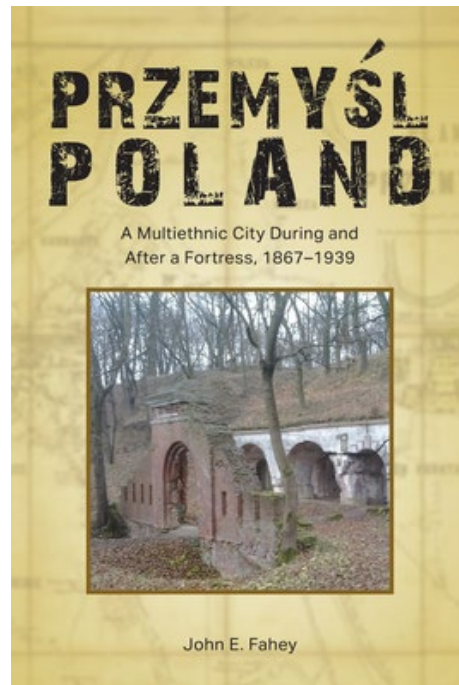


On the Boundary of Empire and Nation

A Conversation with Dr. John Fahey on Przemyśl

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In August 2022, I had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. John Fahey. In his forthcoming book, Dr. Fahey examines the history of Przemyśl—a Polish city near the Ukrainian border. When Russian invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Przemyśl became refuge for thousands of Ukrainians and found itself, once again, at the crossroads amid broader conflicts. In this interview, Dr. Fahey provides insights into how the history of Przemyśl can help us understand the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. He discusses his research and what first drew him to study this complex region. He also reflects on the joys and challenges of doing research and a PhD in European history.

Rusty Allison

Please tell us how you became interested in the Poland-Ukraine border region.

Dr. Fahey

I began as a German historian and participated in a study abroad program. The way things worked out, however, the semester I was able to enroll, instead of traveling to Germany, I went to Vienna, Austria. After spending time in beautiful Austria, I fell in love with the

Habsburgs and the region's history, then continued my passion for studying this region throughout graduate school.

Rusty Allison

How did you become interested in learning about the Przemyśl fortress?

Dr. Fahey

My father served in the US Army, and I grew up on a military installation. As a young teenager, I remember being struck by how much militaries control and influence the physical environment. They can change the landscape and control human traffic patterns via barricades and checkpoints, and I've always been fascinated by that. While studying in Vienna, I learned the road system was designed and built so the military could suppress rioters and protesters. As it turned out, Przemyśl was a great case study for how militaries designed, shaped, and built cities to achieve military and political objectives.

Also, my military experience serving at the multinational base in a warzone in Kandahar, Afghanistan, where I deployed two weeks after completing preliminary exams for my PhD, contributed to my thinking and curiosity about the complexities of multicultural and multinational regions. The more I thought about it, I was curious if there was a place similar to the base in Kandahar in Austria-Hungary. So, I looked for the biggest, most multinational fort I could find, and that was Przemyśl, and I went from there.

Interestingly, as the fortress was being built beginning in the 1870s, the population of Przemyśl increased from approximately 15,000 people to 50,000 in just over thirty years. The Austro-Hungarian Army drove this population increase due to the fort construction. Even today, much of the city of Przemyśl is left over from the Austrian era. The barracks, warehouses, train stations, city hall, and town library remain extant and remind us of the military industrialization of the time. Przemyśl allows us to see the mark of the Austria-Hungarian Empire.

Rusty Allison

How is the Przemyśl fortress remembered today?

Dr. Fahey

This is a complex question and must be analyzed and considered based on the stages of construction and usage throughout the 1880s-1890s into the World War I period. When we think of local history in the prewar era, the fortress is tied to a massive social-democratic movement spearheaded by workers. Eventually, it becomes one of the strong points of socialism in Austrian Poland, led notably by Herman Lieberman.

Another significant aspect of Przemyśl's memorialization today originates from World War I, where it served as a mobilization hub for the Austro-Hungarian army. In August 1914, the army deployed through Przemyśl on their way to fight against the Russians, making it a valuable location to support the war effort.

The most remembered part of the fortress's history comes from the siege of November 1914 to March 1915, when approximately 120,000 soldiers and 23,000 civilians were besieged. Many perished due to fighting and starvation. Today, monuments, statues, and a local museum represent the collective memories and national significance of the siege of Przemyśl. What makes Przemyśl an important location to study is the fact that it represents a multinational battlefield, with its Austrian, Hungarian, Polish, Ukrainian, German, Czech, Slovene, and Jewish combatants' and non-combatants' narratives that create a complex history.

So, today, Przemyśl is an important place to many different groups. Even though it is a long-standing Polish city, it's also a long-standing Jewish city and a Ukrainian city. In addition, people from across the Austro-Hungarian Empire suffered and fought there. To this day you can see ribbons and candles left by Hungarians to remember those lost during the Przemyśl siege.

Rusty Allison

How does your work help us understand the Russian invasion of Ukraine?

Dr. Fahey

What I learned the most in the region is that borders are imaginary, they always have been, but those borders still effect people. Przemyśl, like many places, is a victim of empires and nations trying to install and enforce borders. As we study history, people have made ludicrous territorial claims when we look at times of conflict. For example, during World War I, Tsar Nicholas II claimed that Przemyśl and Galicia would be part of Russia forevermore. The reality is that the region's inhabitants wanted nothing to do with Russia.

At the conclusion of World War I, Przemyśl was thought to be critical to both Ukrainian and Polish nations, and both had legitimate claims to the region. These nationalist claims drove neighbors to take up arms against each other in 1918 and fueled brutal violence throughout the region for the next few decades.

Putin has tried to justify his war with Ukraine through ludicrous historical analysis and examples. This weaponization of history is cynical, but pretty common. He's not the first to force war in service of a historical narrative. The problem is Ukraine, and Eastern Europe more generally, doesn't have just one nation, or one historical narrative. Forcing conformity on the region is impossible—Nazis, Soviets, and other nationalists have tried, but failed. The region is littered with monuments to their failure. Sadly, many of those monuments are cemeteries.

Rusty Allison

What was it like seeing the fortress and visiting the archives?

Dr. Fahey

Anyone who wants to study Central or East Central Europe should be prepared to go to a lot of places. I spent a summer in Vienna and also traveled to L'viv, Budapest, Warsaw, and

Cracow archives, and had a year at the archives in Przemyśl. Being a Central European historian is extraordinarily fun because of the rich history and the endless sights you'll see.

Also, no matter what you're studying, get out there and walk around it to get a sense of scale and physical environment. You will see your subject differently, and walking the grounds will significantly impact your research.

Rusty Allison

What problems or challenges did you encounter while doing your research?

Dr. Fahey

Money, time, and language are always challenges. A bit of advice, be nice to people, and you can help yourself overcome some of these logistical issues. Archivists and locals are generally happy to help you out, and it's always good to be polite.

Work/life balance is also a significant consideration. I got married before I started my PhD, and we had two kids before we moved to Poland to conduct research. Locals treat someone with kids very differently than just some random grad student. Poles and Austrians were incredibly friendly to me and my family. On the other hand, I also had to balance my family responsibilities with my professional responsibilities while working under pressure to complete my research. If you have kids, the clock is constantly ticking. We also had our third child in a Polish hospital, where we learned a lot about a completely different medical system from what we experience in the United States. Being a historian is a wonderful profession that is definitely an adventure where you also get a life education.

Rusty Allison

What advice do you have for anyone pursuing a history degree?

Dr. Fahey

Learn a language and practice that language as early and often as possible. There are several programs out there designed to help students learn languages. Also, apply for research grants. There are a lot of opportunities to earn a grant, as well as additional avenues such as the State Department. No matter the language you choose, commit to learning it, and you'll create opportunities to conduct exciting research.

Rusty Allison

One primary concern we all have is finding a job after graduation. What have you learned about the job market and alternate possibilities in the age of few tenure-track positions?

Dr. Fahey

The biggest advice I can give undergraduate and graduate students is to have a purpose behind their degree. Having a history degree can lead to very good jobs, but you need to have a plan and a backup plan; whether it be advocacy, the military, federal service, or the private sector, finding a job can be difficult.

One thing you can do to improve your marketability is by earning a minor degree in a field that is a growth industry. Consider specializing in a field, such as gender or environmental history, or a region that might be less studied. I also think it's good to gain life experiences, such as spending time in the Peace Corps, volunteering, community organizing, and military or State Department experience. Equally important, build your network—who you know matters. Put yourself out there, promote your work, and learn from others by talking to people!

Another key observation is to know your worth and be willing to quit. Do not take on more work without extra pay. Even though the job market is shaky, do not work for less than you're worth. Be inventive, use your imagination, and put yourself in a position where you can pursue your passion and utilize your strengths. For example, if you are an American political historian, look for jobs in the political arena.

Rusty Allison

What's on the horizon for Dr. Fahey? Would you like to speak about any future projects?

Dr. Fahey

With my new position as a historian for the United States Navy History and Heritage Command, I will be working on nineteenth-century naval history. I will also be teaching at George Mason and embarking on a few writing projects, notably Holocaust stories.

Rusty Allison

Finally, please tell our readers what you find "fun" about being a historian.

Dr. Fahey

In addition to the great travel experiences mentioned earlier, what makes history interesting, fun, and applicable is when you see grand historical themes and ask, "How does it affect these people, this location, and community?" Studying and writing history allows us to see how events or phenomena such as war, nationalism, and imperialism washes over a place and leaves a residue that is interesting and invites more questions about the past.



Dr. John Fahey earned a PhD in Modern European History at Purdue University. He has taught history at the United States Military Academy, Georgia Military College, and George

Mason University. His book, *Przemyśl, Poland: A Multiethnic City Before and After a Fortress, 1867-1939*, will be published by Purdue University Press in 2023. Dr. Fahey is currently a historian working for the United States Naval History and Heritage Command.



Rusty Allison is a PhD candidate at Auburn University. His research examines interpersonal clashes between scientists and the Politburo surrounding the Soviet Union's nuclear industry and how these relationships contributed to the 1986 Chernobyl tragedy in Soviet Ukraine.