

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Goldsmiths, University of London		
Unit of Assessment: 28, History		
Title of case study: Central Europe's First World War: Challenging Memories, Broadening Horizons		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2013-2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Alexander Watson	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Lecturer in History (2013-15); Professor of History (2015-)	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2013-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Watson's research on Central Europe in 1914-1918, published in two highly acclaimed books, <i>Ring of Steel</i> and <i>The Fortress</i>, has exerted significant impact on popular understandings of the First World War. Since the opening of centennial commemorations in 2014, when public interest in the conflict was at its height, Watson's new interpretations 1) shaped the key UK government centennial education initiative, 'The Great War Debate'; 2) influenced the WWI coverage of major public bodies, notably the BBC and the US National WWII Museum, and 3) challenged and changed the entrenched national war narratives of an international readership.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Watson's two books, <i>Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary at War, 1914-1918</i>, (2014) [R1], and <i>The Fortress: The Great Siege of Przemyśl</i>, (2019) [R2], rewrite the history of Central Europe's First World War, advancing new interpretations of this highly ethnically diverse region at a critical juncture of the modern period. Difficult, multilingual, international research underpins both works; together, the books are based on documentation in twenty-seven archives, many underused or totally neglected, in seven countries: Germany, Austria, Hungary, Poland, Ukraine, Israel and the United Kingdom.</p> <p><i>Ring of Steel</i> – published in August 2014 (a part of the research and half of the writing was completed at Goldsmiths) – is the first modern history to tell the First World War from the perspectives of its instigators and losers, Germany and Austria-Hungary. The book advances two major new arguments. First, it argues that Central Europe's struggle in 1914-18 was a 'people's war', in which popular support was essential to the German and Austro-Hungarian states' ability to fight. The book examines the extraordinary self-mobilisation of societies early in the war and explores how political compromise, pervasive sense of threat and spontaneous creation of 'war cultures' sustained their commitment. It also analyses why, in 1916-18, this popular commitment collapsed, bringing the war to an abrupt end and igniting revolutions.</p> <p><i>Ring of Steel's</i> second major argument is that Central Europe's First World War opened the way for the twentieth century's later greater horrors. In contrast to prior historiography's near-exclusive focus on German brutality, <i>Ring of Steel</i> highlights the intense suffering, political radicalisation and social fragmentation that war inflicted on Central Europe. To make this case, the book broaches crucial but hitherto ignored topics. Thus, it presents the first archive-based analysis of Russian military atrocities in Germany in 1914; it is the first work to illustrate the centrality of Britain's naval blockade – a war crime by contemporary international law – in radicalising the conflict; it also details how the resultant food shortages broke East-Central Europe's multi-ethnic communities, fuelling race hatred and, ominously, anti-Semitism. Fear for supply, the study shows, pushed German leaders to seek food security in conquered lands to the east, a development which inspired the Nazi obsession with eastern <i>Lebensraum</i>.</p>		

The Fortress: The Great Siege of Przemyśl – published in October 2019 – tells the forgotten story of the First World War’s longest siege: the 181-day struggle for the Habsburg fortress-city of Przemyśl in 1914-15. The book argues for the clash’s decisive impact on the war, showing that if the fortress had not held in 1914, Austria-Hungary would have collapsed. Like **Ring of Steel**, it draws on copious unseen personal testimony to detail war’s human suffering. **The Fortress** challenges standard periodisation by identifying, in 1914, new roots of East-Central Europe’s mid-twentieth-century ravaging. The book is path-breaking in exposing the Russian army’s massive ethnic cleansing and anti-Semitism in and around Przemyśl, and in highlighting racist and imperialist ideology shared with Nazi and Soviet murderous projects. Taking its story up to 1947, **The Fortress** argues that the violence unleashed in 1914 is an essential precursor to Hitler’s and Stalin’s genocides and cleansings in these ‘Bloodlands’.

3. References to the research

- R1.** *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary at War 1914-1918* (London: Penguin, 2014) ISBN: 9781846142215 (HB); 9780141042039 (PB) [Published in US as *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I* (New York: Basic Books, 2014)] (Submitted to REF2)
- R2.** *The Fortress: The Great Siege of Przemyśl* (London: Allen Lane, 2019). ISBN: 9780241309063 (HB) [published in US as *The Fortress: The Siege of Przemyśl and the Making of Europe’s Bloodlands* (New York: Basic Books, 2020)] (Submitted to REF2)
- R3.** “‘Unheard of Brutality’: Russian Atrocities against Civilians in East Prussia, 1914-15’, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 86, No. 4 (December 2014), 780-825 (Submitted to REF2)
- R4.** ‘Managing an “Army of Peoples”: Identity, Command and Performance in the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1914-1918’, *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (May 2016), 233-51
- R5.** ‘Ego-Documents from the Invasion of East Prussia, 1914-15’, in R. Bessel and D. Wierling (eds.), *Inside World War One? The First World War and its Witnesses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). ISBN: 9780198820598 (HB)
- R6.** ‘Kształtowanie się narodu, upadek społeczności lokalnej: Kraków w czasie wojny, 1914-1918’ [‘Building a Nation, Breaking a Community: Cracow at War, 1914-18’], in K. Sierakowska (ed.), *Metamorfozy społeczne. Studia i materiały do dziejów społecznych Polski 1914-1918* [‘Societal Metamorphosis. Studies and Materials on the Social History of Poland 1914-1918’] (Instytut Historii PAN 2018). ISBN: 9788365880291 (HB)

*All outputs available on request

4. Details of the impact

Watson’s **Ring of Steel** and **The Fortress** have had significant impact on public understanding of the First World War, mainly in Britain but also beyond. The books’ research shaped the key British state centennial educational initiative – ‘The Great War Debate’ – and influenced media coverage at the period of peak public interest in WWI. Through the prizes the books won and were shortlisted for, and the critical acclaim they received, Watson’s research became well-known and sold widely, informing and changing the opinions of a large readership and engaging organisations as diverse as the US National WWII Museum and the WWI computer games developer Blackmill Games.

Shaping the UK government’s centennial education initiatives: ‘The Great War Debate’ was a flagship government centennial programme in 2016-18, funded by the Department for Education (DfE), linking scholars, media and other experts with teachers and A-Level students to raise knowledge of the First World War. Twenty-three debates were held across Britain, with 114 schools and 3,001 schoolchildren – nearly double the official target. Watson’s **Ring of Steel** captured the attention of the educational consultancy which ran the programme, *Hopscotch Consulting*, and he was commissioned to design the first series of debates. As *Hopscotch* testifies, Watson’s ‘extremely valuable’ work shaped 12 debates run ‘from June 2016 – March 2017 ... across the UK, featuring panels discussing the very topics Professor Watson originally recommended’. Surveys prove a tangible impact on pupil participants: 89% confirmed the debates had broadened their knowledge of WWI and 75% reported increased motivation to study history in

the future. Typical testimony affirmed the debates ‘brought the subject to life ... [and] left me wanting to find out more about the war’.[S1]

Influencing the BBC’s coverage of the centenary: Watson was invited to present at a BBC creative session in December 2016, which shaped that organisation’s centennial programming for 2018. The former BBC Head of Specialist Factual Commissioning, Martin Davidson – who was the lead TV and digital commissioning editor at the BBC for its First World War coverage – has evidenced the ‘important impact on our own broadcasting plans’ of Watson’s presentation and writing, especially *Ring of Steel*. The creative session ‘played a key role’ in communication with production teams and in the sharing of ‘key historical background and priorities’. *Ring of Steel’s* impact was reflected most clearly in the BBC’s ‘imperative that the German/A-H dimension be NOT simply side-lined, or taken for granted’.[S2]

Informing public views through centennial commemoration: The exceptional impact *Ring of Steel* exerted on public understanding of WWI in the centenary is affirmed by the AHRC-funded study, ‘Bringing the Marginal into the Mainstream: “Hidden Histories”, Public Engagement and Lessons Learned from the Centenary of the First World War’. The project canvassed British media, museums and local community groups to trace how centennial commemoration had altered public views of 1914-18 and identified *Ring of Steel* as influential in its November 2018 report, ‘Highlights from the Centenary Commemorations of the First World War’. Notably, it was the only book selected for inclusion on this list.[S3]

Prizes, publicity and book sales indicate widespread popular appeal: Both *Ring of Steel* and *The Fortress* achieve direct impact on the public by garnering considerable prestige, and therefore publicity. The books’ appeal far beyond academia is evidenced by the composition of the prize judging panels which honoured them. The judges were not only scholars, but also popular writers and serving soldiers in the British and US Armies. The prizes won by *Ring of Steel*, and the juries awarding them, are:

- (i) **Wolfson History Prize** – Britain’s premier history prize. All academic jury.
- (ii) **Guggenheim-Lehrman Prize** – the top US prize for military history. Mixed jury of academics, popular history writers, senior US servicemen.
- (iii) **British Army Military Book of the Year** – jury of active British servicemen.
- (iv) **Society for Military History Distinguished Book Award** – jury of academics and senior US servicemen.

The Fortress was a finalist for the **Gilder Lehrman Prize** (the renamed Guggenheim-Lehrman Prize), the **British Army Military Book of the Year** award and the popular magazine **Military History Matters Book of the Year** award.

The prizes amplified the attention already drawn by favourable press reviews to the books. *Ring of Steel* was the *Sunday Times*’ ‘History Book of the Year’ for 2014. *The Fortress* was a *BBC History Magazine* and *Financial Times* ‘Best Book of the Year’. It was also chosen by Paul Lay, editor of one of Britain’s two major popular history magazines, *History Today*, as one of five ‘Best History Books of 2019’. The books were reviewed in the mainstream press and literary supplements, including *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Financial Times*, *Literary Review* and *The Wall Street Journal*. The plaudits helped achieve a wide readership. Sales testify to the books’ reach by 31st December 2020: *Ring of Steel* has sold 40,013 copies and *The Fortress* has sold 12,777 in the UK, US and Commonwealth. *Ring of Steel* has been translated into Hungarian and Mandarin. Translations into Spanish (*Ring of Steel*) and into Hungarian, Polish, Italian and Mandarin (*The Fortress*) are underway.[S4, S5]

Altering public understanding of WWI: Feedback from critics, readers and audiences evidences that the core arguments of the books and outreach activities were internalised and altered public understanding of WWI. Thus, for example, influential editor of *BBC History Magazine* (Britain’s best-selling history monthly), Rob Attar, praised *Ring of Steel* for telling ‘the story of the war from the German and Austrian point of view’, highlighting its importance as a ‘challenge [to] how British people understand the war’. Political commentator Simon Heffer, who named it a *New Statesman* ‘Book of the Year’, made the same point, declaring the book’s

Central European narrative ‘revelatory to most British readers’. **The Fortress’s** core arguments linking WWI and WWII similarly were seen as significant by critics: ‘the road to the Holocaust began with the pogroms of this all but forgotten campaign’ (Lawrence James, *The Times*). Readers understood and absorbed key points too. Among readers’ reviews on goodreads.com and amazon.co.uk and amazon.com, two-thirds of reviews (164 out of 246) for **Ring of Steel** and three-quarters for **The Fortress** (36 of 47) explicitly named one or more of the books’ key arguments. The books changed readers’ views as evidenced in their comments: ‘Does an excellent job of upending comfortable Anglocentric preconceptions about the First World War’; ‘Really opened my eyes to the German / Austro Hungarian viewpoint’; ‘I was intrigued ... Far from being another account of a forgotten battle, the book is an incredibly well-written account of the mind-set of phantoms haunting Europe’ are typical reader testimony. [S3, S5, S6]

International impact, unusual collaborations and atypical audiences: **The Fortress** drew the attention of the US National World War II Museum, and influenced its 2020 programming on WWII’s Eastern Front. The Museum’s Senior Director of Programs, Dr Edward G. Lengel, was excited at how the book’s link between WWI and WWII ‘changes scholarly thinking’, and he invited Watson to launch the Museum’s education drive on WWII’s Eastern Front with a public webinar and online article on 1914. Watson also teamed up with Blackmill Games, the computer games developer behind best-selling WWI titles *Verdun* and *Tannenberg*, on a promotional / historical YouTube film on Przemyśl Fortress in 1914. The developers reaped significant reputational and marketing benefits from the collaboration: ‘Working with Professor Watson’, they testify, ‘was a great chance to ... demonstrate our company’s commitment to historical authenticity. It enhanced the appeal of a major content release [a new battlefield map of Przemyśl Fortress] and drew extra community and press interest in the release.’ Gaming news platforms like *Gamasutra*, *IndieDB* and *Gamingcoffee* reported on the collaboration. The film introduced **The Fortress’s** ideas to an audience which, although historically interested, engages with the past primarily through war games. Gamers’ feedback was extremely positive, with nearly 7,000 views in just four months. [S7, S8, S10]

Watson’s other outreach, whether presentations at high profile public events (e.g. Chalke Valley History Festival (Britain’s largest history festival); Wells and York literary festivals), YouTube talks, podcasts or webinars (e.g. the Western Front Association; YouTube’s Great War Channel (with 1.25 million subscribers) podcast), radio (e.g. New York’s WNYC Leonard Lopate Show) and essays for *BBC History Magazine* (Britain’s best-selling history monthly – circulation: 98,000) and US Jewish genealogical society *Gesher Galicia* helped spread the books’ ideas to diverse audiences. In total, Watson’s YouTube and webinar talks have attracted 18,000 viewers, and over 2,000 people have heard him speak live. Up to a quarter of listeners bought copies of the books at live talks. All of this strongly indicates wide engagement with the books’ research. [S7, S8, S9, S10]

Ring of Steel and **The Fortress** demonstrate that well-researched and originally argued history is able to ‘impact’ on and benefit the public, and does change opinions about the past. The last word goes to a teacher who assigns his A-Level students **Ring of Steel**. The book’s discussion of Britain’s WWI naval blockade as a war crime caught their imaginations, and by pushing pupils to think beyond the curriculum specification and question standard narratives of WWI, he writes, Watson’s history – as all good history should – ‘provoke[s] deep thinking and help[s] develop reasoning skills’. [S10]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S1. Testimony of Watson’s work’s impact from Hopscotch Consulting, (May 2017); Report by Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, ‘[First World War Centenary Programme: Legacy Evaluation](#)’, pp. 28-9, (September 2019); Local press report on Great War Debate event in Cambridge, (March 2018). [Grouped Source]

S2. Testimony of Watson’s work’s impact on BBC programming for the WWI Centenary from Martin Davidson (former Head of Specialist Factual Commissioning at the BBC), (July 2019)

S3. [‘Bringing the Marginal into the Mainstream: “Hidden Histories”, Public Engagement and Lessons Learned from the Centenary of the First World War, report from the AHRC-funded ‘Teaching and Learning War Research Network’](#) led by Prof. Catriona Pennell, University of Exeter, pp.4-5, (November 2018)

S4. *Ring of Steel* and *The Fortress* sales figures, (both 31 December 2020)

S5. *Ring of Steel* and *The Fortress* select newspaper reviews & ‘Book of the Year’ choices: *BBC History Magazine* (October 2014) and ‘Books of the Year’ 2019; *Financial Times* (8 August 2014 & 20 May 2020) and ‘Books of the Year’ 2020; *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany) (25 November 2014) & Christmas Recommendations (13 December 2016); *Guardian* (10 August 2014 & 10 July 2015 & 5 December 2019); *Literary Review* (November 2020); *New Statesman* ‘Books of the Year’ 2014; *Sunday Times* (3 September 2014) and ‘The History Book of the Year’ 2014; *Telegraph* (12 August 2014 & 26 October 2019); *Times* (12 October 2019) and ‘Books of the Year’ 2019; *Times Literary Supplement* (17 January 2020); *Wall Street Journal* (US) (21 November 2014); *Washington Examiner* (US), (20 February 2020); Paul Lay’s ‘History Books of the Year’ for *Five Books* website (2019) [Grouped source]

S6. Selected reviews from Goodreads & Amazon & e-mails from the books’ diverse international readership to Watson (2014-2020) [Grouped source]

S7. *BBC History Magazine* articles – ‘The Somme through German Eyes’ (July 2016), ‘Germany’s Final Gamble’ (March 2018) and ‘Trial by Fire’ (November 2019); *The Galitzianer* (*Gescher Galicia*) article – ‘The Great Siege of Przemyśl’ (June 2020); US National WWII Museum article – [‘World War I’s Stalingrad: The Siege of Przemyśl and Europe’s Bloodlands’](#) (July 2020) [Grouped source]

S8. YouTube films / webinars for Blackmill Games, US National WWII Museum, Western Front Association, UK Joint Services Command and Staff College and Wells Festival of Literature

S9. Audience figures & feedback for public talks for Penguin History Lecture at Bristol (June 2015), York Festival of Ideas (June 2015), Chalke Valley History Festival (July 2015), The Training Partnership (December 2015 & November 2017 & February 2018), *BBC History Magazine* (February & October 2016), Essex Public Archive (January 2017), Western Front Association (June 2017 & October 2018 & September 2020), US National WWII Museum (August 2020), Wells Festival of Literature (October 2020) [Grouped source]

S10. Sample e-mails & twitter testimony from museum outreach personnel, games developers, public historians and private individuals, including school teachers. [Grouped source]