ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

HISTORICAL

In the Company of Heroes
Ted Hunt
CreateSpace
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Four Stars (out of Five)

It is impossible to read *In the Company of Heroes* without *Dr. Zhivago* coming to mind. As with the Boris Pasternak novel or the classic movie from the 1960s, Ted Hunt's book is also quite a grand and sweeping tale of war, revolution, love, ambition, and betrayal played out upon the great steppes and snowy wastes of Imperial Russia.

Hunt's book is no mere clone of the better-known tale. It is based on two true, fascinating, romantic, and exciting stories, either of which on its own would be enough to fuel a solid novel. Like the trains that play a central role in each story, the two tales roll forward on parallel tracks that frequently cross and eventually ride a single rail.

Each story has its main protagonist. One is Katya, a young, educated woman of the Russian upper-middle class, who goes to work at the imperial treasury on the eve of World War I. The other is Alex, a Czech student and the son of a rebellious patriot, who along with his friends is drafted into the ranks of the Austro-Hungarian Army.

Alex becomes a key figure in the Czech Rifle Corps, a growing band of Czech mutineers and deserters from the Austrian army who form a special unit in the Russian forces. This group eventually becomes the famous Czech Legion, an army-within-an-army that fights for the allies to earn a Czech homeland independent of the crumbling Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The Russian empire, too, is crumbling. With St. Petersburg threatened by advancing German armies, the vast tsarist treasury of gold, platinum, jewels, and other valuables is secretly loaded onto an armored train, which is sent deep into the Urals for safekeeping. Katya accompanies the treasure on its journey.

Both the treasury and the Czechs, along with Hunt's two main characters, become playing pieces in an ever-changing and dynamic game of revolution, counter-revolution, foreign intervention, coup plots, international politics, and greed. Familiar figures from this chaotic period appear like guest stars in a mini-series. Lenin, Trotsky, Kerensky, and the Czech patriot and eventual president Thomas Masaryk all make appearances, sometimes to explain the story,

other times to advance the plot.

In the Company of Heroes has a good plot, but Hunt frequently meanders away from it and, at times, loses his focus. An American army officer of Czech descent named Victor, for example, often promises to become the third protagonist, only to slip into the background, resurfacing when a *deus ex machina* is needed.

While Hunt presents a good story, he fails to craft a strong villain. None of his three identifiable antagonists is menacing enough, consistent enough, or threatening enough to create the tension for which this plot begs.

Oberleutnant Schumann, a typical evil Nazi SS officer type common to 1940s war movies, is a weak and one-dimensional protagonist. Admiral Kolchak of the White Russians is little more than an impediment to Alex and Katya in the later half. Rad Gaida, an ambitious rival to Alex both in the Czech Legion and with Katya, has promise, but is more rascal than villain.

Hunt's prose is at times poetic, as when he describes the Trans Siberian railroad on which the Czech and treasury trains travel as "two rusty streaks of iron, through the vastness of nothing, to the extremities of nowhere." At other times, his writing style is more pedestrian and pedantic.

While an enjoyable and well-researched read, *In the Company of Heroes* is not a great read. What Hunt's protagonist Alex says to Victor late in the story is also true of Hunt's novel: "This war is getting too damn complicated. Every time I think we're getting close to home, something caves in."

Mark G. McLaughlin