



WHAT DID THE NINTH FORT OF KAUNAS FORTRESS LOOK LIKE IN 1915-1916?

Martynas Kosas

The photography collection of Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum contains a large collection of images from WWI. The majority of the collection consists of photographs taken by soldiers and photographers of the German Empire. This was the result of the natural divide between the East and West. It was during this period that cameras were becoming popular in Europe, and people became increasingly interested in photography; therefore, naturally, soldiers, especially officers, took their cameras with them to the front in order to record their military journey. There are not many photographs related to Kaunas Fortress from the Tsarist Russia period; most of them were taken before the war, mostly in photo studios. The photos taken by the soldiers and photographers of the German Empire show images from before and after the capture of Kaunas Fortress. They are dominated by the images of defensive fortifications destroyed by artillery explosions, cannons of the fortress destroyed in positions, trench lines, defenders of the fortress-prisoners of war and the leisure activities of the soldiers who captured the fortress. Most of the photographs are from the first defensive section of the fortress, which was not only the most intensively shelled area during the main assault, but it was also significantly damaged by heavy artillery shells. The Fourth Defensive Division with the Ninth Fort practically did not take part in direct military action; it was neither assaulted nor shelled by large-calibre artillery and did not suffer any major destruction. The Germans undoubtedly

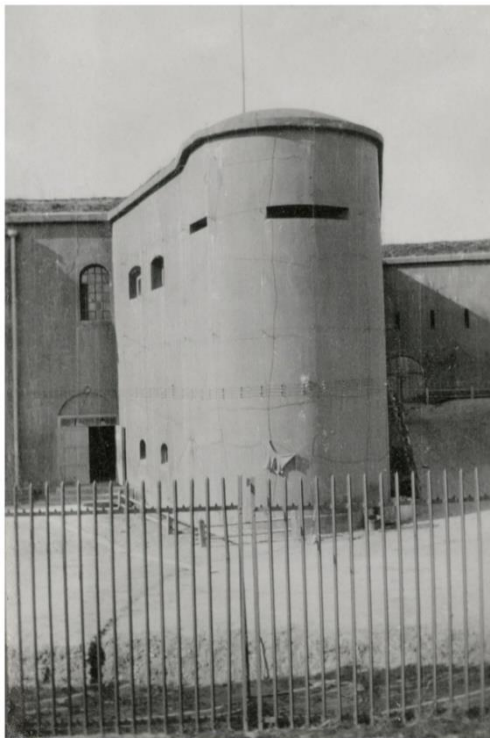
photographed and documented the surroundings of the Ninth Fort, the internal equipment and the views of the area. However, only one photograph of the Ninth Fort of Kaunas Fortress has survived, in which an unknown war photographer captured a view of the fort in late August or September, 1915. As the photograph is numbered 248, this suggests that there were many more photographs of the fort. The caption in German on this photo 248 reads the following: "Vom östlichen Kriegsschauplatz. Kowno. Die Kaserne in Fort 9" (English: "From the Eastern Warfare Site. Kaunas. Casemate of the Ninth Fort"). Looking at the photo, one can see a view of the fort taken shortly after the retreat of the garrison led by Captain F. Demidenko. The two-storey concrete barracks and the semi-caponier are visible. The windows of the barracks are covered with sandbags used by the fort defenders to prepare for defense. On the facade, one can see two places where German artillery shells hit the fort, one of which can be seen now as well. The approaches to the fort were enclosed by a few metres high defensive barrier, which was damaged during the shelling. In the courtyard, four soldiers of the German Empire can be seen, one of whom is a guard standing at the gate with a rifle on his shoulder, the other two soldiers are walking with food cauldrons, and the fourth one, wearing a light-coloured jacket, is probably an officer. A fort guard's hut, painted black and white, is built at the gate, and a little further on, at the entrance to the semi-caponier, tables and benches from the fort's premises are stacked up. A car of an unidentified model is parked near the fort gate. The analysis of such photographs can provide us with many historical details, i.e. what the site looked like at the time. However, of course, a single photograph is not enough to reveal all the details, especially if it is a larger object.



Barracks of the Ninth Fort of Kaunas Fortress, 1915 © KDFM (GEK-33546)

This year marks the 108th anniversary of the capture of Kaunas Fortress by the German Imperial Army on August 18, 1915. This anniversary will be marked by a special find made by Svetlana Tichanova, a museum employee and enthusiast of military history and fortification. Her interest in the topic of war and fortification, and her consistent and purposeful search led her to the Bavarian State Archives in Germany. In cooperation with the archive's staff, she discovered a unique collection of war photographs, the compilation of which began in April 1915 on the initiative of Karl Staudinger, the head of the Bavarian War Archive. The collection consists of 24,409 photographs covering the whole WWI, the battle fronts and the places where the soldiers of the German Empire fought. The collection also includes a photo album of the Bavarian Cavalry Division entitled "The Cavalry Division's theatre of war in Poland and Courland." Among the many photographs from Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, three unique photographs of the Ninth Fort of Kaunas Fortress were found, which had never been seen in Lithuania.

The first photograph reveals the unique location and the whole view of the semi-caponier, which is currently obstructed by the museum's administrative buildings, which were built later, during the interwar period in Lithuania, when a branch of Kaunas hard labour prison operated in the fort. The photograph was taken standing in front of the protective, counter-assault bars surrounding the fort. As shown in the photograph, the courtyard, unlike the other forts, is not paved with stones as one can see a yard of ploughed soil with a ditch dug for water to run from the façade towards the ditch by the protective bars, as well as there is a path made of planks. The fort is surrounded by a low wooden fence close to the walls. There is a communication or power line on the façade. There are three staircases at the entrance to the semi-caponier. The iron gate, which has survived until now, is painted a light (grey) colour. Where the glass door is now installed, there was a shelter with wooden double gates. On the roof of the semi-caponier, there was a pole, which could have been used as a communication antenna or a flagpole (in German, *Flaggenstock*).



Semi-caponier of the Ninth Fort of Kaunas Fortress, 1915-1916. © Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv

The second photo shows the fort's courtyard from the south-west to the north-east. On the left, one can see the facade of the fort's barracks. A communication or power line is mounted on the facade. There are cannon holes with glazed sash windows. An electricity or communication pole with ceramic insulators is attached to the facade. A low wooden fence can be seen immediately adjacent to the fort wall. Two blankets are hung on an outstretched rope near the facade. The inner courtyard is not yet fully formed, only the ground has just been trampled down, while on the right there are the protective bars that surrounded the fort. Their fixing from the inside is visible. Next to the bars, the cut railway rails are stacked in piles, which had to be used to cover the windows of the barracks during the assault. A pillow and a blanket are placed on top of the stacked rails, and a grey soldier's blanket with a coloured stripe is hanging on a rope nearby. In the foreground, as in the preceding photograph, there is the fort's semi-caponier with an antenna or flagpole on the roof.



Courtyard of the barracks of the Ninth Fort of Kaunas Fortress with a semi-caponier in the background, 1915-1916. © Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv

The third photo has the least detail, but it is the one where we can see the object that was rarely photographed. It is an armoured observation turret designed and built by the Tsarist Russian military engineer A. Ariens. The photograph shows the concrete top of the turret, a steel dome with observation holes, rising above the roof. Interestingly, the steel dome is probably painted grey. A German imperial soldier is sitting contemplatively on top of the turret, holding a stick in his hand. The soldier is wearing a 1914 'M14 Waffenrock' transitional jacket and the boots of 1866 model. On the soldier's head, there is a 1910 'Feldmütze M10' military cap with a grey camouflage stripe.



A German imperial soldier is sitting on the A. Ariens system armoured observation turret on the roof of the barracks of the Ninth Fort of Kaunas Fortress, 1915-1916. © Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv